

# JADAVPUR JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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Professor Amiya Dev's appointment as the Vice-Chancellor of the Vidyasagar University, Medinipur, has deprived us of an able editor of JJCL which he had steered steadily from 1982 to 1995. On behalf of the Department and the readers, we take this opportunity to congratulate him.

Change in editorship of JJCL, however, does not imply, we believe, any essential change in editorial principles. In fact, our former student and Guest Lecturer for sometime, Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya's article had been selected by Professor Dev himself. Professor Anantha Murthy's 1994 convocation address at Visvabharati is singularly important as it is a testament of a leading Indian writer of our times. The first Pablo Neruda Lecture (1995) at the Developing Countries Research Centre, University of Delhi, delivered by Professor Sisirkumar Das, the doyen of Indian academicians, is but a record of Indian response to the Chilean poet. The article by Mr. Jalal Uddin Khan, Assistant Professor of English, International Islamic University of Malaysia, examines the fictional representations of the Spanish Civil War on its 60th anniversary. Sri K. Satchidanandan's paper presented at the first SAARC International Symposium on 'Contemporary Literary Scene: Search for Roots?' in 1992 is an insider's view of modern Indian poetry. Dr. Tapati Mukherjee, also an ex-student of the department, is a Sanskritist by specialization. Her paper was presented at the CLAI conference in New Delhi in 1993.

Swapan Majumdar

## **TAGORE IN HIS OWN TIME**

*U. R. Anantha Murthy*

What Tagore said in his paper "The Centre of Indian Culture" in the year 1919 has remained true for our own times today: perhaps his words of warning have become more urgent and more disquieting than they were in the pre-independent India. After India became independent we seem to have become more parasitical intellectually than in his own times of political bondage. At the very beginning of his talk Tagore says:

On each race is the duty laid to keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part in the illumination of the world. To break the lamp of any people is to deprive it of its rightful place in the world festival. He who has no light is unfortunate enough, but utterly miserable is he who, having it, has been deprived of it, forgotten all about it.

Tagore was a profound thinker and visionary and he had foreseen what would happen even if a people became free but the temper of its mind had not changed. He is speaking of the attempts made at his own time to create new institutions:

We forget that the same weakness in our character, or in our circumstances, which inevitably draws us on to the slippery slope of imitation, will pursue us when our independence is merely of the outside. For then our freedom will become the freedom to imitate the foreign institutions, thus bringing our evil fortune under the influence of the conjunction of two malignant planets — those of the imitation and the badness of the imitation — producing a machine-made University, which is made with a bad machine.

Even well meaning attempts at selecting the best features of European Universities and then patching them together in eclectic perfection is criticized by Tagore, for we forget in all such imitative attempts "that the European Universities are living organic parts of the life of Europe." You can't transplant them; it would be like wishing to have a full-grown son all at once, in a hurry. "An impatient craving for results and an unfortunate weakness for imitation have led us to cherish just such an unnatural desire for a National University, full fledged from its very birth."

May I suggest that this be a valid criticism of much of our effort these days in creating institutions of higher learning? We are either satisfied creating institutions which cater to populist pressures where there is absolutely no space for striving for excellence; or we create elitist institutions whose products migrate to the rich pastures of the West, with no gain for the poor country that subsidized their expensive education.

The paper from which I am quoting has an excellent section on the medium of instruction that has profoundly altered the thinking of many of us in India. Unfortunately, those who agree with Tagore and Gandhiji on this matter have of late become an inconsequential minority. The desire to imitate has so much triumphed that in most of the provinces in our country there are hardly enough Bhasha medium schools if one wants to impart to one's children quality education. We know very well the arguments for imparting education in English — where are the textbooks in our languages? But Tagore says in 1919: "But unless higher education is given in the vernacular languages, how are textbooks to come into existence? We cannot very well expect a mint to go on working if the coins are refused circulation."

Surely some ominous change has taken place in our cultural ethos; Tagore could speak with a healthy persuasive vigour in the pre-independent India as he had hopes that he could change the imitative culture of his times. What he feared has taken full grip of us now. We are not even troubled in our conscience any longer. It does not occur to us that we have to face challenges at every step if we are to be truly innovative and original. Otherwise we will fail to create a world that is in tune with the living continuity of our civilization in India. We seem to be too much in a hurry to catch-up with the West and, consequently, we do not know what to give up and what to cherish in our past.

For instance let us take the question of languages in India. Are they harmful for the unity of the country, or do they contribute to the richness of our culture? Tagore had responded to the challenge of many languages in India as a rare opportunity for exploring our uniqueness as a culture. We as his descendants not only not try to use our languages for original conceptual thinking, but we are even denying to our young children the opportunity to grasp the meaning and experience of their immediate environment in the natural language of their environment.

Let us consider now the role that Tagore himself played in bringing about a renaissance in our languages. The literature in Sanskrit, both secular and sacred, played in the past a crucial role in offering a model for development for literature in the various Indian languages. If Sanskrit gave the structure for literary texts, the rich texture was however provided by the other great tradition of folk literature that has lived on orally in our languages even to this day. While *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have always performed the function of knitting us together almost like two languages in the whole of the subcontinent, the literary figure — I mean the writer as a historical person — that the classical writers in the Indian languages emulated was Kalidasa. For a writer like Pampa in my language, a Jain poet writing in the tenth century, the literary model for composition was Kalidasa. The immediate creative environment in which Pampa transformed the influence of Kalidasa, however, was his own Desi, the orally transmitted indigenous elements that Kannada has preserved even to our own times. That a writer in Sanskrit provided a model was no surprise then, for Sanskrit because of its pan-Indian spread has always remained a potential storehouse of influence on Indian thinkers of diverse sects and writers in different languages. This remained so even in the great days of the Bhakti movement when the egalitarian spiritual movement empowered the Indian bhashas. But no writer in an Indian regional language could become a literary figure for emulation for the whole country in the past until Tagore appeared on the national scene. That he received the Nobel Prize only facilitated his wide reputation, but the creative response was genuinely to the merit of his writings and also to the idea of writer that he embodied in his own person. For instance all the major writers in Kannada — Masti, Kuvempu and Bendre — some of whose texts, I can objectively say, bear comparison with Tagore's, responded to Tagore as a master and guide — he was their Gurudeva whom they read critically. For instance Kuvempu wrote a very insightful short piece in which he said that Tagore failed to write an epic because of his Brahmo rationalism. The theoretical foundations of Brahmoism must have inhibited his response to the Puranic imagination of our mythical tradition. Kuvempu wrote thus despite himself being skeptical of the Puranic concerns of our tradition.

I must however add here that it was not only literature proper that prompted many of our elders to learn Bengali; Shri Ramakrishna

Paramahansa was also there inspiring both the laymen and writers. There was of course the novels of Saratchandra, the fascination for whom was a part of our experience of growing-up. Such was the national ethos during the days of our struggle for freedom from British rule. Even in those days we were imitative, and yet we were also sensitively critical of our tendency to imitate. The rude shock of the impact of an alien European culture that politically enslaved us was transformed through an intense intellectual suffering and political struggle into a creative renaissance, because, then, we were restlessly searching for a national identity, different from that of our masters.

While this could happen before India became free, when there were no organizations like either the Sahitya Akademi or the NBT for translation and dissemination of Indian literature, why has it not been happening after our independence? Is it because there are no writers worthy of such excellence in our midst? But our concern for excellence doesn't appear to be the only reason for our imported ideas and literary fashions in our times. We catch up with the latest trends in the West ever so quickly and we are ready to accept even minor talent in the West as our model.

I am really sorry to be talking at such length about our propensity for imitation. We have in our midst some critics of westernisation. But they are often not free from this propensity for blind imitation, if they happen to be revivalists. For they seem to want us to imitate our own past. In the banality of the results that both the westernisers and revivalists produce, they are alike. While the attempt to revive what is gone is doomed to fail as it ignores the vital forces of contemporary life, a blind imitation of the West, although it may appear to be temporarily successful, is sure to result in permanent second rateness of our spirit. It is also a state of inward barrenness for one cannot always be catching up; one is bound to get fatigued in one's soul, someday.

Tagore, along with his contemporaries in Bengal and other parts of India was open to the invigorating influence of the west without ever losing sight of the usable past. Therefore, the whole earlier generation of writers could be original without losing their roots in their own traditions. They knew how to celebrate the rich diversities of our culture without losing sight of what makes all of us a single unified civilization. It was the vision of Tagore and other writers of his times that we too in India should have a common civilization like Europe



'with an intellectual unity that is not based upon uniformity of language'.

After Latin played its part as the sole language of ideas and literary creation in Europe, Europe emerged as a great federation of cultures without losing the unified sense of a common civilization. What is Europe without Shakespeare and Dante in whose works the living energy of common contemporary life got expressed? It has not even mattered that a language in Europe is spoken by a small number of people. A difficult and teasing writer like Kierkegaard writing in a small European language could influence the whole of Europe. And, in the early decades of our century, as we have noted, Tagore's thought played such a role in India. The reason for this is quite apparent: he was no westerniser but was moved by the vitality of the west, and was no revivalist but was profoundly influenced by the perennial wisdom of the Indian past. Many of us in our times get stuck in an either/or position, and we do not have the creative openness or resilience to deal with our total situation with the existential authenticity of immediate, as well as far-sighted response. He and Gandhiji between them created for us the foundations of a nationhood, different from the narrow concept of a nation-state beyond which Europe has not so far evolved.

I want to suggest that the polemics between these two great souls must be studied as basic texts by all our students. They complemented each other and by their honest articulation of differences they completed the circle of thought. Even as an exercise in creative polemics, the exchange between Gandhiji and Tagore was a unique occurrence in the history of ideas of our country. The challenge the two faced is still there before us calling for the utmost sincere and self-searching effort on our part.

Both of them had asked this question: what should be the nature of our nationhood? The question is of utmost urgency for us today, for after the British conquest of our nation, we have again been caught up with the tide of globalization, which is not merely of economic consequence, for it is bound to cause profound cultural changes in our very pattern of living. We cannot turn away from this tide either, but must face it with all our spiritual energy in alert attention.

Such thoughts as these lead me on to speculate with you on what we must do to make this University founded by Tagore live up to the expectations of its great visionary founder. When I was a High school

student in a small but picturesque little town of the Sahyadri mountain region I remember my dream was to become a student of Santiniketan. Santiniketan was truly a national center for us, then, to which we aspired to go after what our immediate environment could give us. This was in the middle forties when India was not still free. But when we became college students and entered our post-graduation, we had by then won our independence, thanks to the efforts of our elders. My generation had not actively participated in the struggle to free our country, and our boyish idealism had begun to wane, imperceptibly. Therefore, it was either Oxford or Cambridge, and, a little later, it was any University in the USA that most of us who were fortunate enough to get a highly subsidized education in India wanted to go. What had happened to our minds in the meantime? Or was there also something wrong with the way our cherished institutions had begun to shape themselves into? Both questions are related and call for an honest self-reflection on our part.

Mere nostalgia will not help in answering this question. Often we indulge in nostalgia for it brings us comfort that others are to blame for our sordid present. We should first objectively see what still remains of the past and how much of it is positively life-giving. A great feeling that one gets in the environment of Visvabharati is that it still seems to cherish art and culture and poetry in these days of either competitive careerism or mindless political hooliganism. And therefore we get emboldened to ask the important question whether this hallowed place is a Central University with a difference? Can it become more of a national institution of importance than it is now? Of course, nobody wants it to become a faceless cosmopolitan institution. It should retain its Bengali character, the character that made Bengalis once think of the whole country, and not merely of their narrow political and economic interests. Whenever I talk to my literary friends in Bengal, this question comes up, and I must say that they are profoundly aware of what is missing in their political and cultural ethos. They do not take comfort in the thought that Bengali institutions are not any worse than others. In fact, the Bengalis can afford to be a little complacent, as their educational institutions still produce brilliant young men and women. And yet we have a right to demand more from an institution like Visvabharati.

I would like to make a submission as a fellow writer. It is indeed a matter of shame that Tagore has not been translated with enough care

to other Indian languages. I will give you an instance. It occurred to some of us after the crisis in Ayodhya that the one great Indian text that can take us philosophically into our national crisis was Tagore's *Gora*. This novel, published at the turn of the century, is still relevant for us in our continued search for our own kind of national identity that suits our genius and, along with it, our practical everyday task of governing a society of diverse cultures. The available English translation of the novel is both clumsy in its quaint use of English and extremely uncouth in its appearance as a book. The translations made into Indian languages are either out of print, or inadequate as translations. We ought not to have allowed an Indian classic to suffer such a state. All of us are to blame for this. Yet with whatever was available the Akademi arranged discussions of the work in all the important Indian languages, so that what was a mere clash of political interests could be seen as a profound conflict of ideas to be resolved in the modern Indian ethos.

There is a lesson for us in what I have just narrated. We tend to be absent-minded on such important matters in our everyday, petty squabbles. We should now lose no time in systematically taking up fresh translations of all major works of Tagore including his philosophical essays into all the Indian languages. The Indian literary world has not really done much to make Tagore relevant to our times. In fact, we should all own up this truth: If Tagore is still alive as an influence the credit should go to the great film-maker Satyajit Ray; he has reinterpreted the great poet for our times. None of us in the literary world has done much to match the great film-maker. We are often experts in mellifluously expressed reverence for the dead. We should stop finding comfort in such verbal worship and start discussing the dead critically with an urgent sense of their relevance for our own troubled times. The best in the past can live through the minds of only those who can give an alert attention to the pulsating moment of the present. Such was Tagore in his own time.



## THE PEOPLE'S POET

*Sisir Kumar Das*

You have done me a great honour by asking me to deliver the first Pablo Neruda Memorial lecture at the Developing Countries Research Centre, University of Delhi. The institution of an annual lecture to the memory of the great Chilean poet in an Indian University is indeed a significant event in the history of the cultural relationship between India and the continent of South America. It acquires an added significance, when one remembers the painful account recorded by the poet himself of the indignities inflicted upon him during his last visit to this country.

It may not be well-known that Pablo Neruda during his visit to India in 1928, travelled in different parts of the country and attended the annual conference of the Indian National Congress. He had recorded briefly his experiences in this country in his remarkable autobiography *Memoirs*,<sup>1</sup> in which he described India of that period as "the nation in the thick of its fight for liberation". Although his first work *Crepusculario* (1923) was five years old at that time and his second book of verse *Veinte poemas amor y una canción desesperada* published two years later, established him as one of the most powerful poetic voices emerging on the hispanic literary scene, Neruda was not known in India. Very few people in India had noticed that his second book, an anthology of passionate poems of youthful vigour and charm, had in it a free translation of a Tagore poem: 'You are the evening cloud floating in the sky of my dreams', which began with the words 'en mi cielo al crepusculo cres como una nube.'<sup>2</sup> His next visit to India in 1950 was at the instance of Joliot-Curie the President of Partisans of Peace, who wanted him to deliver two letters, one to Sir C.V. Raman and another to Nehru, personally. When he was picked up for the trip and a task apparently simple, Neruda was surprised but he thought that it was "his enduring love for that country" which motivated Joliot-Curie's choice. Neruda, then an internationally acclaimed poet, a recipient of the International Peace Prize that year, along with Pablo Picasso and Nazim Hikmet, boarded the plane for Bombay with high hopes and fond memories of

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the country he visited two decades ago as a care-free young man. "I was going back to India", he wrote "It was no longer a colony fighting for its emancipation, but a sovereign republic, the dream of Gandhi whose first Congress I had attended in 1928".<sup>3</sup> His love for India, however, had received a rude shock at the Bombay airport. All his belongings were checked with meticulous care. A page of a French newspaper with which he wrapped his shoes were inspected as carefully as if, Neruda wrote later, "it were a secret document" and his shoes were "studied inside and out, like unique samples of fabulous fossils". The custom officials took away all his papers including the letters he was to deliver, which were of course returned to him later. "This was the country whose struggle for independence was part of my experience as a youngman, I thought" — wrote Neruda.

His meeting with the Indian Prime Minister, extremely formal, and even cold and curt only intensified his sense of humiliation. When the hotel manager informed him that the notification restricting his movements within the limits of Delhi had been waived and he could visit the Taj Mahal which he longed to see and in fact had mentioned to Nehru, Neruda said: "Get my bill ready, I'm sorry I have to pass up that visit. I'm going to the airport right now, I'm taking the first plane to Paris."<sup>4</sup>

I need not go into the reasons for the official rudeness. Rarely does the bureaucracy care for poets, and at times even the best of the elected representatives of the people do not speak the voice of the people. Neruda left India in anger and desperation; he had no opportunity of knowing that precisely that was the time when he had become an idol of a new paradigm of public poetry, a perceptive blending of intense patriotism and tender lyricism. It sounded so alien and yet so beautiful, almost as sacred as psalms, patriotic yet throbbing with a voice transcending geographical barriers:

Fatherland, my fatherland, toward you I turn my blood,

But I long for you, as a child for his mother

Full of tears

Receive this blind guitar and this lost forehead.

I remember the excitement with which Neruda, along with Mayakovsky and Nazim Hikmet, used to be read by the young poets of my generation. He came to us not only in his English incarnations but also in translations in our own languages.<sup>5</sup> Many of them were

incomplete and even imperfect, but all appeared so fresh and vigorous, and their impact on our young minds was immediate, deep and strong. With what dreams in our eyes and passion in our voice we read those lines dedicated to Boliver:

And so today a circle of hands surrounds you

Next to my hand there is another, and another and  
another next to it.

And still others, down to the depths of the dark continent,

And another hand unknown to you

Comes also, Boliver, to clasp yours.<sup>6</sup>

When we used to read these lines aloud, did not we also say to the poet 'another hand unknown to you/comes also, Neruda, to clasp yours'?

## II

The theme of my address is not Neruda's poetry but it has a direct bearing on his idea of poetry and his commitments to the suffering people of Chile. It involves issues of general and wider implications of relations between poetry and culture and consequently of the role of the poet in specific cultural spaces. The idea of the people's poet deserves serious critical attention not only because of the claims that have been made from time to time for recognition of such cultural heroes in different periods of history, but also because of the challenges it offers to the dominant traditions of poetics that strongly insist upon a necessary correlation between the appreciation of poetry and the formation of a literary elite. The issues that have kept the academia engaged since the time of Plato, generating both light and smoke, have created such an unwelcome gap between the theories and practices of literary production that the idea of a people's poet has never been considered an issue of poetics proper. It has been viewed as a part of a defence of the political use of poetry. Or of a poetry dominated by politics rather than aesthetic principles. Hence the people's poet is considered to be a political construct without any aesthetic considerations. Political ideologies and necessities have indeed played a significant part in the production as well as in the transmission and preservation of literature throughout history. And yet poetry has followed a course of its own, defining and redefining its function in society, in terms of potentiality of its medium, namely,

language, and also in terms of its power to evoke emotions, and justifiably claiming an autonomy of its own.

There are poets who are bluntly political and yet not necessarily successful in establishing an enduring relationship with the people. Neither the knowledge of poetic art, nor the understanding of social and political history alone is sufficient to the making of the poet. The idea of the people's poet cannot be properly understood only as an intervention of politics in poetry, it is a distinctive role of a poet, it is a choice. When Plato objected to poetry, except the hymns and panegyrics, as a stimulus to lower passions and resistant to rationality, he also realised the dangers poetry could bring about in the stable structure of society. The power to move people which is entailed in the art of poetry can indeed be dangerous. Hence Plato took the safest course and banished it from his ideal state. Not only did the Athenians of his time but readers of poetry all over the world read poetry primarily for its power to move them emotionally. There were always poets — and Plato knew that — who had consciously tried to evoke emotions such as anger and agony of the people. It is this deliberate design that distinguishes the people's poet from other makers of poetry. His target is primarily the readers belonging to the lower strata of the society or the oppressed at a given point of history. The idea of the people's poet, then, can be defined with reference to the social position of the reader, which can be called with some qualifications, the very centre of poetics in major traditions of the world. The Indian *ālaṃkārikas* developed a concept of *Sahṛdaya*, an ideal reader, who alone by virtue of his training in grammar and rhetoric and philosophy and other fine arts, was capable of responding adequately to works of art. The construction of the ideal reader emanated from a social condition that sustained a leisured class and denied the large multitude all benefits of education. In the Greco-Roman tradition too, the existence of a literary community was the necessary condition for appreciating poetry in its various forms including the drama. The qualifications of the reader of poetry in respect of learning and taste and sensibility as stipulated by different societies not only divide the communities into two major groups, but in fact suggest a divide within literature as well. Raymond Williams in his closely argued work *Marxism and Literature* claims that "in its modern form the concept of 'literature' did not emerge earlier than the eighteenth century".<sup>1</sup> He reminds the

modern reader who may not be aware of the etymology of *literature*, that it developed from Latin *littera*, a letter of the alphabet, that literature was in effect “a condition of reading” close to the sense of ‘literary’ and that slowly it extended beyond literacy and became a new category of polite learning. The gradual expansion of the meaning of literature, which included written works, not necessarily ‘imaginative’ in character, and finally only texts of certain quality is part of a history of a shift from “learning” to taste or sensibility. In our traditions — not identical with that of the West, the word *Sāhitya*, now accepted as the equivalent of *literature* was derived from *Sahita*, i.e. association, connection, combination or union. This ‘combination’ or ‘association’ was primarily a linguistic relationship between work and meaning (hence the definition *śabdārthau sahitaau kāvyam*)<sup>8</sup> which culminated into an aesthetic relationship, but did not accommodate the possibilities of other relations such as the relation between the readers and the text. The modes of transmission of texts in Indian literary tradition, however, created a space for the illiterate, which recognised the importance of the orality as well as some kind of hybridization of communication, i.e. oral transmission of texts accompanied by other arts, music, dance and painting. But that too, divided our literature not only into the elite and the popular but treated popular literature as inevitably an inferior literature. Appayya Dikshita, the noted scholar of poetics, of the 16th century wrote elaborately on Sanskrit and remained oblivious of the poems of the Alvars and the Nayanmars written in his mother tongue. Similarly one does not find any mention of the literature produced in the Telugu in the works of the 17th century scholar Jagannatha, or of Bengali in *Ujjvalanīlamani* by Rupa Gosvamin. The social formation on the basis of education, accomplishment and taste had their corresponding manifestations in literature. The people’s poet was an uncomfortable challenge to the elite literature. The metaphor of the well and the flowing water used by Kabir in contrasting Sanskrit and *bhāṣā*, the language of the people, is only a part of the manifesto of the people’s poet asserting the legitimacy of a literature produced outside the boundaries defined by the existing canons. The categories of ‘folk literature’, ‘primitive literature’, ‘tribal literature’ etc. that became popular from the 19th century onward, emerged almost exclusively out of anthropological interest, not from literary concerns. It is true that the literary historians saw necessary links between the vast



floating mass of stories and ballads and occupational songs and the growth of several genres of canonical literatures. But those texts were considered as a part of the pre-history or the proto-history of a given literature or as *stoff* in the thematological studies. The process of canonization kept a large body of texts produced by the people outside the domain of literature and made the idea of the people's poet critically irrelevant. Undoubtedly, the canons of literary hierarchy had been challenged from time to time by the people, as evidenced by the kind of poetry produced during the medieval period in our country, but that history had remained unrecorded. The *Dalit* literature in the Marathi language that had erupted suddenly in the second half of the century is only a manifestation of a voice of anger and humiliation that had remained dormant through centuries. Vaman Nimbalkar addressed the poets of the 'high' literature as *śabda prabhuno* (master of words) with understandable sarcasm:

Words of your poetry, never did they touch their  
blood-stained feet and their burning shame  
your words were not for those human beings  
whose stomachs ached in anger, whose  
backs shrivelled with each strike of the whip.<sup>9</sup>

Mothobi Mutloatse, a powerful South African writer, denounces all existing literatures claiming aesthetic superiority over what is normally considered a politically motivated sub-literature:

We will have to *dander* conventional literature  
old fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going  
to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before  
we are through, we are going to kick and pull and  
push and drag literature into the form we prefer.<sup>10</sup>

This fulmination against established literary canons is the typical expression of all protest literatures produced by the underprivileged of our century in search of a new literature. Its dominant voice is anger. Our own Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal cries out: *majhya raktatil aganit suryano* (O innumerable suns, emerge from my boiling blood).

### III

Before I proceed farther I quote two pronouncements by two poets, one confessing with admirable modesty his failure to represent the voice of the people, and the other celebrating his success with

justifiable pride, in becoming a poet of the people. The first statement that of Tagore is made towards the end of his life in a verse narrating his concerns about the great mysteries of life and nature, more precisely, about man.

Man stands farthest in this mystery,  
 hidden in time and space.  
 To know him is to commune and love.  
 Seldom have I won access  
 my ways of life have intervened  
 and kept me outside.  
 The tiller at the plough  
 the weaver at the loom  
 the fisherman plying his net  
 these and the rest toil and sustain the world with labour  
 I have known them from my corner of renown.  
 Only the outer fringe have I approached  
 unable to enter the intimate precincts.  
 I know the song basket is empty  
 if filled with trinkets when links are gone  
 between life and life.  
 And I know my failure  
 whenever my song has been incomplete  
 wherever it has missed the all.<sup>11</sup>

Tagore's anxiety for the 'incompleteness' of his songs and his 'failure' to know man (not the spiritual abstraction, but the man who by his labour sustains the world), comes from his realisation of a deep relation between poetry and social forces. It is this awareness of the totality of man that gives poetry its power and character. It is well established that the growth and decay of particular literary genres are conditioned by the changes in the social organism to which they belong, and the awareness of the social reality with which the writer works conditions his role as an artist. Whether Aeschylus or Dante, Kalidasa or Kabir, Shakespeare or Goethe, Cervantes or Pushkin, to name some of the great figures of literary history, the extent of their appeal and the response of the readers of their works is circumscribed by their awareness of and attitude to the vast multitude outside the literate and leisured community. Hence Tagore, conscious of his own limitations, visualizes the possibility of the emergence of the people's

poet who is not a mere mouthpiece of politicians, but a poet by his own right.

The second statement, a bit long but coming as it does from Pablo Neruda himself is extremely important.

My poetry and my life have advanced like an American river, a torrent of Chilean water born in the hidden heart of the southern mountains, endlessly steering the flow of its currents toward the sea. My poetry rejected nothing it could carry along in its course, it accepted passion, unravelled mystery, and worked its way into the hearts of the people.

I have to suffer and struggle, to love and sing; I drew my worldly share of triumphs and defeats, I tasted bread and blood. What more can a poet want? And all the choices, tears or kisses, loneliness or the fraternity of man, survive in my poetry and are an essential part of it, because I have lived for my poetry and my poetry has nourished everything I have striven for. And I have received many awards, awards fleeting as butterflies, fragile as pollen. I have attained a great prize, one that some people may decide but not many can attain. I have gone through a difficult apprenticeship and a long search, and also through the labyrinths of the written word, to become the poet of my people.<sup>12</sup>

This is the statement of a sense of fulfilment, celebrating the victory of his poetry as much as his final identification with the toiling people of Chile. He says, 'my reward is the momentous occasion when, from the depths of the Lota coal mine, a man came up out of the tunnel into the full sunlight on the fiery nitrate field, as if rising out of hell, his face disfigured by his terrible work, his eyes inflamed by the dust, and stretching his rough hand out to me, a hand whose calluses and lines trace the map of the pampas, he said to me, his eyes shining: "I have known you for a long time, my brother". That is the laurel crown for my poetry....'<sup>13</sup>

Both the statements privilege the centrality of the people in the production and transmission of poetry and bring out the inadequacy of the conventional poetics. Tagore waits with expectation for the arrival of the poet of the people.

Come, poet of the multitudes  
sing songs of obscure man  
reveal his unspoken soul.<sup>14</sup>



Neruda on the other hand celebrates the arrival of the poet in his own poetry. But if one looks into the history of literary formations, of the use of poetry among various occupational groups, and also into the story of reception and survival of literary texts and their authors, he will find such poets in every society in some form or other. The statements of Tagore and Neruda, therefore go beyond autobiographical confines and problematize the concept of the people's poet in relation to specific historical conditions. One may argue that a poet representing a whole community is a fact of primitive society. With formations of different socio-economic groups and cultural sub-groups within them, the function of poetry and of the poet had undergone radical transformation. The people's poet, therefore, is not a sustainable critical category; the problem regarding the extent of the impact of certain kind of poetry can always be discussed within a framework of the stratification of readership.

But there are poets who write with the consciousness of their role in the society, which they think they have inherited; it is a vocation instituted from the beginning of history. Neruda writes in the chapter significantly titled 'Poetry is an Occupation' in his *Memoirs*:

Poetry is a deep inner calling in man; from it came liturgy, the psalms, and also the content of religion. That poet confronted nature's phenomenon and in the early ages called himself a priest, to safeguard his vocation. In the same way, to defend his poetry, the poet of the modern age accepts the investiture earned in the street, among the masses. *Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests.* In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light.<sup>15</sup>

The poet and the priest might have been the same person at a particular point of history, as were the priest and the physician, one healer of the soul and the other of the body, their functions, however, were not identical though similar to some extent. Both poetry and religion emerged out of the necessity of communication and negotiation with nature and God. Both participated in a communal act, involving the whole society; while the priest was a mediator between man and God, the poet was a narrator of the experience of the whole society. He was the first historian to record the experiences of man, both mundane and sacred. The re-enactment of those experiences with continuous improvisation not only empowered the

community to renew their contact with the past but also explore the possibilities of the unborn time. Hence the utterances of the poet — the texts — become valuable and the community wanted them to be preserved for posterity. The poet and the priest both discovered the power of language: the priest made it an object of reverence, co-existing with God, the poet found in it an instrument to represent the reality as well as to restructure it, by readjusting the sequences of time, telescoping the events, as if it gave a power to intervene into the flow of creation. It is a power to create a parallel world. The priest decoded the words of God, the poet created codes themselves. One is an act of reverence, the other of celebration.

The Greek word *poietes*, meaning a maker or a workman suggests the primitive relation of poetry and labour, associating it with the idea of 'production'. Yet Socrates found the poets as carriers of message only almost similar to the priest through which the oracles were transmitted. Homer did not claim the authorship of *Iliad* but declared himself as an agent of the divine voice. An agent he certainly was, but it was the people for whom he sang and it is the people who preserved the song, a text recording their experiences and aspirations. It is the widening gap between groups separated by taste, leisure, and power that brought the major split in the occupation of the poet resulting in the hierarchy in poetry itself. The modern idea of literature recognized a specialization of language and its continuous differentiation from other forms of composition designated as 'non-literary'. The history of poetry is indeed a history of the continuous tension between the languages and modes and concepts used by different social groups.

Prometheus of Aeschylus, to give a rather straight forward example from a classical text, is a poetic hero emerging out of a consciousness troubled by the fierce battle between the despotic power and an open revolt by an individual. The early myth of Hesiod is transformed by the soldier-poet into a drama of reconciliation between the champion and the oppressor of mankind. There are readers also who read in this play a defence of the ruler of the world, their sympathies for Prometheus notwithstanding. But there are readers who side with Zeus from their ideological point of view. One such reader is, not strangely, D'Annunzio, the poet with sympathies for Fascism. The reconciliation between the ruler and the sufferer that mark the closure of the play, however, was not necessitated by Aeschylus' regard for

Zeus but actually from his experiences of the struggle between the landowners and the merchants culminating in a, as Thompson puts in, "*concordia ordinum* marked by the abolition of aristocratic privilege and the extension of the franchise to the whole of the citizen body". Thompson points out that by excluding the slaves from his conception of democracy Aeschylus was "able to regard the democratic revolution as a fusion of opposites symbolised in the reconciliation of Zeus and Prometheus".<sup>16</sup> But precisely because of the awareness of the existence of the proletariat of his time, Shelley, on the other hand, could not accept the Aeschylean conclusion. His Jupiter was overthrown. It is this awareness and the choice that distinguishes the poet of the people from the rest.

Neruda belongs to a tradition of poetry that had existed in human history from the earliest times. It is tradition rooted deep in the primitive urges of man for metre and rhythm, and making poetry a part of both work and leisure, of critical moments of struggle and of hope. "In a substantial part of my work", Neruda wrote, "I have tried to prove that the poet can write about any given subject, about something needed by a community as a whole."<sup>17</sup> Chekov said a similar thing about his short stories only to point out that the potentiality of that form of art did not lie hidden in the *stoff* but in the version. Neruda writes "about something needed by a community" because he believes that this is the obligation of the poet. Poetry is a vocation for him: poetry is neither ritual, nor mindless repetition, not simply a search for originality but a negotiation with both light and darkness. Being the people's poet, Neruda knows it too well, however, that still there is a gap between his poetry and his readers. "In the face of this stumbling block of seventy million illiterates (in Latin American countries) we can say", Neruda writes, "that our readers have not yet been born. We must speed up the birth, so that we and all poets will be read."<sup>18</sup> These statements of Tagore and Neruda eventually highlight a contradiction in the concept of the people's poet — a contradiction not easy to resolve. Tagore waits for the new poet, the poet of the multitudes; Neruda waits for the new reader, the multitude itself. It is a question of a new relationship to be established between poetry and the reader, the multitude. In a society like ours, with millions of illiterate with little leisure to respond to things of beauty, poetry has little room in it. On the other hand, poetry is being written throughout history by men and women anxiously

trying to speak to them as well as, to speak for them, with varying degrees of success. Many of our medieval poets aspired to that condition of the people's poet. Subramania Bharati<sup>19</sup> asserts "namkkut tolilkavitai nattir kulaittal" ('My vocation is poetry, the service of the country') as does Nazrul Islam ('I am not the poet of the epoch, I am a poet of this moment'). Participating in a debate on commitment of the writers Sartre wrote, 'what is the literature of an epoch but the epoch appropriated by its literature?' One can extend this statement by rephrasing it, 'what is the literature of a people but the literature appropriated by its people?' The ultimate resolution of the problem, thus, is linked with the opportunities offered by the society to its people. Till then, the poet must wait, but cannot remain inactive. With the power of the primitive poet-priest the poet has to assure the multitude, as Neruda does, that he, he alone, continues to record their voices, he is the witness of their history.

I bear witness!  
 I was  
 there,  
 I was there  
 and I suffered and I  
 bear witness  
 although there is nobody  
 to remember,  
 I  
 am the one who remembers,  
 although there are no eyes left on the earth,  
 I'll go on seeing  
 and that blood  
 will be recorded here,  
 that love will go on burning here.  
 There's no forgetting, ladies and gentlemen  
 and through my wounded mouth  
 those mouths will go on singing.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Memoirs*, tr. by Hardie St. Martin, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 81-2.

2. Tagore's poem is to be found in *The Gardener* (1913), no. XXX. This is his own translation of the Bengali poem 'Mānas Pratimā'. Neruda's translation, then is a translation of a translation. Neruda's version has been translated again into English by W.S. Merwin, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (poem no. XVI), Jonathan Cape, London, 1969.

3. *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 199.

4. *Ibid*, p. 204.

5. See Robin Pal, 'Bāmlāy Pablo Neruda', *Pramā*, XV, 4, April-June 1994, pp. 70-157. This is an extremely valuable account of translations of Neruda's works in Bengali.

6. 'A Song for Boliver', *Residence on Earth*, tr. into English by Angel Flores, New York, 1946. Its Bengali translation by Bishnu De appeared in the early 1950s. See *He Bideśī Phul*, Bak, Calcutta, 1956.

7. Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*, OUP, London, 1977, p. 16.

8. Bhamaha, *Kāvyālaṃkāra*, 1, 16. See S.K. De, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1960, 2nd revised edition, vol. II, p. 34.

9. Vaman Nimbalkar, *Gavkusabaheeril Kavita*, Aurangabad, 1973. I am grateful to Professor N.D. Mirajkar who read out this poem to me and provided me with a literal translation. I also thank him for the information he gave me about Dalit poetry on various occasions.

10. Introduction to *Forced Landing*, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1980, quoted in D. Maughan Brown, 'Politics and Value in South African Literature', *Literary Theory and African Literature* ed. Joosef Gugler et. al. LIT, Hamburg, 1994, p. 144.

11. The original Bengali poem is in *Janmadine* (1941). English translation by Amiya Chakravarti, included in *A Tagore Reader*, ed. by the translator himself, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p. 366. I have quoted here with slight modification.

12. *Memoirs*, op. cit., pp. 170-71.

13. *Ibid*, p. 171.

14. Chakravarti, op. cit., 366.

15. *Memoir*, op. cit., p. 266.

16. George Thompson, *Aeschylus and Athens*, London, Reprinted in 1946, p. 348.

17. *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 267.

18. *Ibid*, p. 196.

19. I am grateful to my friend Dr. C. Raveendran who supplied me this quotation from Bharati's 'Nanmanimalai', stanza 25.

20. 'Yo Recardo', *Isla Negra*, tr. by Alastair Reid, Rupa & Co., Delhi, 1993.

**BENEDICTION IN PERFORMANCE:  
Reverberations of *Chaitanya Lila* from the 1880s**

*Rimli Bhattacharya*

*Binod:* [Still dressed as Nimai, prostrates before  
Ramakrishna]  
*Ramakrishna:* This is the boy who played Nimai! Good boy, a  
good boy.  
*Giris:* Not a boy, a girl.  
*Ramakrishna:* A girl! That was a fine trick! (Putting both his  
hands over Binodini's head) Say Hari [is our] guru;  
[Our] guru [is] Hari.  
*Binod:* [Repeats]  
*Ramakrishna:* [Repeats]  
*Binod:* [Repeats]  
*Ramakrishna:* May you have *Chaitanya*.

The enactment of a climactic moment in Brajendra Kumar Dey's celebrated jatra, *Nati Binodini*, parva 2, scene 3. And the replay of a definitive moment from the annals of theatre history. Here is an exchange which appears to need no explanation because of its systematic inscription in cultural memory. The reference in contemporary discourse is always to the moment of 'authenticity' signalled and established by the 'actors' in the scene.

The scene is arresting in more ways than one. It is visually so, not only because of the familiar tableau of saint-sinner, but because coming as it does immediately after the one depicting the renunciation of *sansar* by Chaitanya, it becomes for the spectator a multi-layered representation of three 'people' in three temporal frames: the visible actress (late 20th century) who is playing Binodini Dasi (from the production of the late 19th century) who is playing Chaitanya (late 15th-early 16th century). (It is a matter of happy chance that when Binodini left the stage she was the same age — twenty-three or twenty-four — as Chaitanya when he renounced *sansar*.) Thus, while the scene accentuates an experience of historicity by drawing the spectator through this layering with all its attendant

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religious-erotic connotations (in view of the literal and spiritual cross-dressing involved), it simultaneously proves effective in arresting all possibility of action on the part of both 'Ramakrishna' and 'Nati Binodini'. What we witness in these productions and representations is in fact the actual process by which the female subject, Binodini, (as also that of the male subject Ramakrishna) is substituted for iconised figures, the former as the recipient and the latter as donor.

Binodini playing Chaitanya also evokes reverse sexual roles i.e. she recalls Chaitanya playing Radha to manifest and evoke the appropriate bhava, but for the audience, she also plays the 'male element' in Chaitanya to perfection. Binodini is truly androgynous in playing Chaitanya, but she is *always* the fallen woman playing a perfect Chaitanya. Although the *Kathamrita* contains many incidents of such benedictions and the transmission of an extra-ordinary awareness through touching (by the *dikshaguru*), the isolation of the act and its dramatic framing, as also the fact that as the *barangana-nati*, Binodini is truly the lowest of the low, imparts to the scene its uniqueness as a spectacle of faith.

In fact, for the scene to have an effect in its immediate context of city, the public theatre and its extended bhadralok constituency, Binodini Dasi must forever be engraved as the fallen woman, the outstanding nati. Her professional brilliance is then to be read (backwards) as stemming from her faith, which in turn is seen also to originate from her social origins (the unknown father, the anonymous place of birth, the lack of a *kulaparichay*) and her continued occupation, where she is an ashrita, a mistress, even as she appears in public for a ticket-buying audience. The incident becomes proof of the inexhaustible grace (*kripa*) of the *Patitpaban* (deliverer of the fallen) and consequently responsible for the remarkable transformation of Binodini's life. The benediction is both an index of her faith, perceived as constituting acting talent, as much as it indicates the grace of the saint reaching out to the lowliest.

### I. Staging Bhakti: Chaitanya Lila in the 1880s

Binodini Dasi could only be considered a safe subject if she was introduced as 'Nati Binodini' - the 'nati' who was saved/redeemed by Ramakrishna. The germination of this morality tale was actually



coterminous with the composition of the actress's autobiography, it is voiced in the admonishing-admiring tone of the preface that Girish Ghosh wrote to *Āmār Kathā* (AK) in 1913, a preface that Binodini had at first rejected and then included in her book after the death of her guru.<sup>1</sup> In a rather lengthy preamble, Girish gives his reasons for having originally expressed hesitation about writing a preface and why he has finally agreed to do so. He concludes:

Reading this autobiography will destroy the pride of the zealous devotee, the righteous will embrace humility and the sinner will be given new hope.

Those who are unfortunate like Binodini and having no option take up a disgusting path for their livelihood, those who have been seduced by the honeyed words of the licentious, they too will be hopeful that if like Binodini, they can commit themselves to the theatre, body and soul, they can expend their despicable birth in the service of the society. Those who are actresses, will understand the kind of dedication that is necessary towards one's roles in order to earn the praise of the masses. Thinking thus, I have agreed to write this preface.

Girischandra may have felt obliged to have presented his protege's text as an exemplum because he was astute enough to realise the the only guise in which Binodini Dasi could be accepted by the contemporary readership,<sup>2</sup> was as the patita whose outstanding performance (particularly as Chaitanya) drew upon her the blessing of Ramakrishna himself. Although Girischandra, unlike most of the later commentators on this episode, took pains to highlight Binodini's intellectual abilities and superior acting skills in general (i.e. in addition to or besides the benediction by Ramakrishna), there was in effect, a conflation of technical excellence or virtuosity with moral excellence or virtue, already formulated in this presentation.

Girischandra's preface to Binodini Dasi's autobiography was written several decades after the production and resounding success of *Chaitanya Lila* (1884). Broadly speaking, there have been two kinds of critical responses to the play. Only a few scholars have sought to relate, and then too somewhat sketchily, the success of the play to the matrix within which the lifestory of the saint-reformer was originally staged. Debipada Bhattacharya, the editor of the collected works of Girischandra, attributes the tremendous popularity of *Chaitanya Lila* to Hindu revivalism, the Theosophical movement, the

Neo-Vaishnava movement and Ramakrishna's own role in praising the play. The other and more frequent response has been to puzzle over the excessive popularity of the play either for its lack of tension or suspense considered 'proper' to drama, or to critique Giris for his 'medieval mindset'. In either case, it is Girischandra's unquestioning acceptance of Chaitanya's divinity that appears to be cause for condemnation or celebration and for the consequent rating of Giris as a good dramatist and/or a good devotee. Although an analysis or evaluation of the play is not the purpose of this paper, it is necessary to consider briefly Giris's playtext and some contemporary accounts of the play in order to hypothesize about the kind of audiences it drew and to evaluate its impact on the theatre scene of the time. The emphasis here is on some of the factors contributing to its 'event-making' quality.

With regard to the context of the play:

1. *Chaitanya Lila* was produced in an existing background of Hindu religiousity which had already been tapped by what has subsequently come to be termed as the 'religious plays' (*dharmiya natak*) in Giris's repertory. The first years of the Star Theatre had seen the production of *Daksha Yagna* (1883): *Dhruba Charitra* (1884) and *Sribatsa Chinta* among others. Giris himself has dwelt at length on his own concern with an audience who needed explaining to and the consequent advantage of a religious play with a puranic theme, which takes as a starting point an intimate familiarity with the plot. It may be remembered that 'historical plays' like *Ananda Raho* (1881) had failed while the puranic series of seven Ram-based plays — *Ravan Badh*, *Lakshman Barjan*, *Sitar Bibah*, *Sitaharan*, *Ramer Banabas* — produced from 1881 through 1882 had been a great success.

2. Most of the religious plays mentioned above already had a captive audience in jatra palas. Thus *Dhruba Charitra*, the story of the exemplary boy devotee of Vishnu, figured as a favourite *pala* in many popular jattras both in Bengal and elsewhere, as for example in the andarmahal of the Jaipur court where it was performed by an all-female cast. However, Chaitanya or Nimai as he was fondly called, obviously had a very different appeal: firstly, for being a 'historical person', and secondly, for being Bengal's own saint.

Chaitanya's life had also been the subject of jattras, but Giris's subtitle, viz. 'a prem-bhakti natak' indicates the shift in emphasis in restructuring it as a gospel of love. The appeal to an extended new audience would be considerable.

3. While Girischandra himself felt that his *Chaitanya Lila* was greatly inspired by Milton's *Paradise Regained*, he was also reworking many theatrical conventions familiar to an audience bred on non-proscenium performance forms. Traditional emblematic characters from jatra such as that of Bibek acquire a clear explicatory function in the play, particularly in foregrounding the significance of the avatar in Kaliyuga. Giris brought this out most forcefully in the interchanges between the characters of Mother/progeny of Sin/Lust, Greed, Moh and the choric Kali (yuga). (*CL*, Act II, sc. 4.) This explains as well the doctrinal importance given to allegorical characters such as Paap (Sin), Kali (of Kaliyuga) and Vairagya (Renunciation), without his taking away from the inherent drama of the saint's life.

4. It is likely that a section of the audience for the bhakti plays was drawn from those who already followed some version of popular Vaishnavism. From the early 1860s onwards there were innumerable small presses operating in North Calcutta, particularly along the Garanhatta-Chitpur axis, catering to a readership 'of ordinary people, particularly those following Vaishnavism and who did not have or did not expect to acquire English education.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite the continuities suggested above, *Chaitanya Lila* as a play, did mark a return to the *desiya* and represented a 'coming together' of various disparate groups. It granted the public theatre in Calcutta a status, hitherto absent. Ramakrishna's appearance at the theatre undoubtedly provides a final seal of approval, but the other factors present in the regrouping merit more detailed consideration.

Girischandra's preface to Binodini with which we began this section, melds the good actress with the true bhakta. Contemporary reviews of *CL* which celebrate its 'sublime Morality' reveal a similar conflation in the foregrounding of an interactive bhakti. Thus, in response to attacks in *The Englishman* critiquing the representation of 'Mahaprabhu Chaitanyadeb' by a socially outcast actress, Sambhucharan Mukhopadhyay, editor of the *Reis and Rayyet*, writes in praise of the play. He comments in particular on Binodini's rendering of prem-bhakti:

...Chaitanya Lila is indeed *a moral exercise alike for players and audience*. No man can sit for half an hour in the Star Theatre without being struck by the general superiority — the high tone of the acting... (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

In an open letter to the *Reis and Rayyet*, Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society makes explicit the 'role' of the actress who played Chaitanya:

The poor girl who played Chaitanya may belong to the class of unfortunates (alas; how unfortunate these victims of man's brutishness) *but* while on the scene she throws herself into her role so ardently that one only sees the Vaisnava saint before him... So thoroughly does the Star actress feel the emotions of the saint she personates, so intensely arouses in her bosom the religious ecstasy of Bhakti Yoga, she fainted dead away between the acts the evening I was there, and a medical man who shared my box had to go behind the scenes each time to administer restoratives... (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

It may be recalled that the Theosophical Society moved from its original base in Madras to set up its Bengal branch around the time that the play was first staged. Yet another dimension is added to the 'deshiya component' in its approbation by Sir Edwin Arnold and his praise of Girish's play as 'truly Hindu theatre'. Amongst his various literary productions, Arnold had re-presented narratives from the Mahabharat, such as 'Savitri; or, Love and Death' and 'Nala and Damayanti' as part of his *Indian idylls* (London: 1983). He had written a preface to Miriam Knight's translation of Bankimchandra's *Bish-briksha*, entitled in English, *The Poison Tree, The Tale of Hindu Life in Bengal* (London: 1884). More pertinent to the business of theater, Girishchandra's play on the life of Buddha, *Buddhacharit* (1885), was based on Arnold's narrative poem, *The Light of Asia or The Great Renunciation* (1880). In the preface to this poem, Arnold had observed that '...the mark of Gautama's sublime teaching is stamped ineffaceably upon modern Brahmanism.' (pp. 5- 6) In Girish's interpretation, Buddhadev was another incarnation of Vishnu. Arnold's works are also of course, feeding into the contemporary rage for mysticism and exoticism in London.<sup>6</sup> Arnold's contribution to the staging on the 'Empire of India Exhibition' in London in 1895 has also been documented recently.<sup>7</sup>

Subsuming the Olcott-Arnold position within the broad banner that goes by the name of 'Hindu revivalism,' would undoubtedly

erase the many internal histories as well as the shifting positions within each of the movements with which Olcott or Arnold identified themselves.<sup>8</sup> It is possible nevertheless, to trace and keep in mind the complexity of some of these alignments. Both Col. Olcott and Sir Arnold are duly cited by Giris himself as well as by later commentators as proof of the non-Hindu, non-Indian 'other' who have been converted by the virtue of the subject matter and the 'verity' of the performance. Arnold in particular, appears in many of Girischandra's essays on the Bengali theatre as a representation of the discerning foreigner who has grasped the essence of Indian/Hindu culture, unlike many Bengalis who wrote disparagingly of the public theatre.<sup>9</sup>

While the preponderance of *karun rasa* on the public stage is the occasion for caustic comment by Pramathanath Bishi in *Girirachanasambhar* (op. cit.), for theatre scholars such as Hemendranath Dasgupta<sup>10</sup> as well as for earlier theatre people like Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay and Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay, yet another proof of 'the honest appeal' of *CL* is the overwhelming flow of tears that the play elicits. The alienness of groups such as Young Bengal who have been constructed as an opposition to the 'popular' or the 'deshiya', is exorcised finally in this flow of tears. (Dasgupta, Ibid. p. 37) Accordingly, a humanitarian concern for the 'unfortunate' actress is conflated with an approbation for 'traditional' sentiment. In his letter from which we presented an excerpt above, Col. Olcott defines the appropriate spectatorial response: '...it is impossible for anyone *but a civilized peg-drinking babu* not to be moved...' (emphasis added), thereby indicting that whole class of rootless and declassé (or pseudo-civilised) individuals whose aspirations towards westernisation would prevent any truly bhakti-based (Indian) response. Like many others on the topic, Olcott's letter, although aimed at those who attack the actress on moral grounds, is actually a polemic on faith and on 'ways of seeing'.

### *The constituents of the spectacle:*

Unlike the specialisation of functions in theatrical production in Britain by the late nineteenth-century, in Bengal, the same theatre had to cater to various demands. Puranic and bhakti plays were performed in tandem with other pieces usually of a different genre: these



included pantomimes (*panchrangs*), sketches (*nakshas*) and farces (*prahasans*). A typical evening's fare might call for very different, even contradictory, responses, as the following advertisement in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* suggests:

STAR THEATRE

Wednesday, 17 January at 9 p.m.

The Sublime religious play

CHAITANYALILA

to be followed by the sparkling society sketch

EKAKAR

or

The social chaos.

Thus, the morally uplifting experience may only be presented as *a part of* the bill of fare. Binodini herself mentions the mastery of bhava which allows her to move from the depiction of one experience to a completely different one and play completely conflicting roles even in the same play in the same performance with equal success. (AK) Cf. Ramakrishna's humorous comment on the incongruity of staging Amritlal Basu's hugely successful *Bibaha bibhrat* (The Matrimonial Fix) (1884) immediately after *Brishaketu*. (*Kathamrita*). The flexibility enjoined on both performer and audience is premised on a mastery of technical skills and is also an acknowledgment of the production process of the theatre; the 'religious affect' is presented as one of the many offerings of the urban theatrical experience. The religious in any case, is inextricably bound with positions on cultural identity and its alleged affiliations, as we explicate in following sections.

The real breakthrough represented by the success of *CL* and the many other plays it inspired lay in its innovations in music, song and dance. The play was scored by Benimadhab Adhikari, chief pupil of Ramat Vaisnav and Ahmad Khan. Girischandra records that it was Benimadhab who 'first introduced the vaishnav-style [sic] dancing on stage...and taught Binodini' [to dance as Chaitanya]; the latter in turn greatly helped him in instructing the 'lower-rank actresses', meaning

the lowly *sakhis* or chorus girls. (GR, vol 5, p. 336.) The introduction of the *mridang* for example, must have added an extra dimension to the existing 'Concert', the term prevalent for the ensemble of musicians and musical instruments used in the theatre.

*Samkirtan* as a form of 'emotional worship' or singing the name of god (*Harinam*) in a group is recognised as the most crucial innovation made by Chaitanya. (De. op. cit., pp. 108 & 442.) In an earlier phase of Brahmo movement, Keshabchandra had attempted to revitalize the *samkirtan* as a means of public mobilisation. It was ironic that it was ultimately in spectacle-land, performed by the actors and actresses — i.e. those who are paid and trained to enact the group fervour — that the *samkirtan* enjoyed a renewed prominence.

Girischandra believed that the *language* of *samkirtan*, of Vaisnav devotion, was understood by *all*. Language therefore was not simply the words but the communicative model itself; the *samkirtan* on stage was to some extent, a resolution of the standard contesting claims between language and spectacle, bringing together the visual and the auditory to create *bhava*. More importantly, the *samkirtan* inside the hall and for a ticket-buying audience functioned partially as a device to break down institutional systems, particularly the clear bifurcation of performance space in the urban proscenium theatre. As Raymond Williams noted in his essays on culture, such institutional systems are themselves 'a function of specialisation'.<sup>11</sup> By language, we mean here primarily songs with a particular emotional affect that almost every Bengali playwright has perceived to be the 'soul' of Bengali drama. Given the powerful tradition of songs encoded in emotional memory, it does not seem surprising that the songs from *CL* have continued to dominate productions of *Nati Binodini*; they also enjoy a tremendous popularity — outside of stage performances — in records and cassettes.

As to the question of the performer, clearly these plays were written with *Binodini* in mind, much as Victorien Sardou's plays were written with Sarah Bernhardt in mind, but the *Giris-Binodini* 'partnership' was of a very different order. While more than one generation of actors and actresses regarded Girischandra as their mentor — Tinkori Dasi (1870-1925) and Kironbala (1868-90) were two other star pupils — there is no question that *Binodini Dasi* was especially favoured by *Giris* on account of her exceptional versatility and commitment, and that is reason enough for the play-wright

manager to have cast her as the charismatic performer-saint. Whether the performance is actress-based or text-based, the star appeal of a particular actress may be used to initially attract the public, although of course, the role may make her a star. (The latter is illustrated in the case of Kusumkumari, who by virtue of her superior singing prowess is said to have outshone Binodini in the role of the boy-devotee Prahlad in *Prahlad Charitra*, so much so, that she subsequently became known as 'Prahlad-Kushi'.)

In her own writings, Binodini records at length the intense physical thrill of performance itself: the stage fright, the power of impersonation, the effect of mechanics in shaping her own involvement with the scenes of self-immolation; and of the excitable response from the audience who take the player for the character depicted, particularly in the case of 'Muslim characters' (AK). Therefore, it is not very surprising that given the ecstatic chanting demanded by Chaitanyaism, the conscious exultation of body and mind produces psycho-physical transformations or the desired *satvika vikara*. This is manifested in the carefully phased signs such as perspiration, tremor, stupor, stillness and trance,<sup>13</sup> which confirm the devotee's attainment of a particular bhava. Binodini swooning and dancing to exhaustion was itself a spectacle, irrespective of the verisimilitude of her impersonation of a historical-religious character. In this case, the cross-dressed performance becomes an event — even a ritualised event with public accounts and debate on the details and chronology of the ritual.

In the case of *Chaitanya Lila*, in addition to the usual instruction by the motion master, the music master, the dance master and the rigorous training sessions in speech, or rather declamations, the play involved an extended period of indoctrination by 'the learned' and the 'great devotees' (*bhaktachuramani*). These included theatre aficionados such as Sisirkumar Ghosh who were not professionally attached to the theatre and who had other more stable social identities. The play afforded them an occasion where they might participate in a production of the public theatre but for a 'superior purpose', i.e. for the propagation of Vaisnavism, untainted by the exigencies of livelihood.

The excitement of drama on stage and in the box, the greenroom and Girischandra's office (according to Binodini's account) is brought to a peak with Ramakrishna's advent. The intense drama between



destined guru and the recalcitrant bhakt, Girischandra, aided and abetted by other bhaktas created an in-house circuit of emotional energy that fed into the performance and accounts of the performance. Subsequently, it was to inform almost all of theatre history and reconstructions of such inscribed memories in literary texts and dramatic productions a century later.

With the extension of the stage into other spaces of the theatre hall and the breakdown of the roles between the actress (immoral and illiterate paid employee), the learned and the devout (non-theatrical professionals) recognised as Vaisnavs, and the mediating figure of the mystical saint (Ramakrishna) who is both participant and spectator — i.e. spectator moved to participation, a conceptual reordering of space is taking place. By enacting 'Chaitanya Lila' on stage and by being conscious of yet another lila being enacted in the interaction with Ramakrishna, 'presence' is being juxtaposed against 'representation'. Ramakrishna's presence at the performance and the subsequent act of benediction becomes the subject of many anecdotal essays which serve to imbue the public theatre with a sense of mission. (Just as Girischandra himself is 'given' the task of using his plays for educating ordinary people: 'lokshiksha' in Ramakrishna's words. There is also a sense that the bhaktas and disciples of Ramakrishna were privileged spectator-participants in a unique 'play,' approximating *lila* in an immediate terrestrial context.

The multiple dimensions of the dramatic in the perception of social relations is brought out in an essay by Giris Ghosh. In this memorial essay on one of Ramakrishna's devotees (Ramchandra Dutt, popularly known as 'Ram-dada'), Giris reiterates the 'real reason' for Ramakrishna's appearance at the Star.<sup>14</sup> (Ramakrishna had already visited the theatre twice at the time that Giris wrote this essay):

...although Ramchandra always followed his Master (*Master*) everywhere he went, when Ramakrishna went to the theatre he did not [accompany him], because he considered the theatre to be polluted ground (*kalushita bhumi*). But when he saw Master bestowing his grace on me in his home, he lamented to his friend Sri Debendranath Majumdar, Alas, how ignorant I have been, the very place that the Master chose to step into, where he appeared to grant grace to the fallen, I thought to be polluted. The Master alone knows his lila. Deendayamaya had gone to the theatre to be merciful to the

lowly *in the guise of* watching the performance, but how would a stupid person like me understand this...(emphasis added).

In *Chaitanya Lila*, Giris was presenting Chaitanya's life as an indigenous heritage, it was also a model appropriate for contemporary crisis. Chaitanya had been regarded as a saviour and Kaliyuga, the epitome of sinful times, was also a time of salvation, particularly for those conventionally relegated to the margins of society, such as women and lower castes. The Chorus comprising allegorical characters like Vivek, Bhakti and Vairagya (some of whom are carry-overs from jatra) voice doubts, raise questions, explicate and elucidate in order to establish the historical moment of Kaliyuga, the specific relevance of prem-bhakti and thence the need for an avatar (See esp. *CL*, Act II, sc. 4). But while on the one hand, the aim is to represent on the stage and articulate through the *samkirtan* and dance a desired collective, care is taken to disassociate the religious ideology of the Bhakti plays from the lower-class populist Vaisnavism which like jatra and *kavi-gan* was increasingly perceived as 'degenerate'.<sup>15</sup> This is true of both the extended theological expositions within the play and in other discourses in other forms, as in Girischandra's later speech on 'Dharmasamannyay' (1909) where he explicates on the mission of Mahaprabhu Chaitanyadeb as 'Patitpaban Gauranga'.

The demand for bhakti-rasa plays proved so great that even the latest technological advances such as a dynamo installed by Gopallal Seal for the Emerald (the original Star theatre hall at Beadon Street) and expensive 'scene-sceneries' failed to draw crowds. The old hits did not work even after Girischandra was hired by Seal in a bid to bolster sales at a monthly salary of Rs. 350 and a bonus of Rs. 20,000. It was not until the staging of *Purnachandra* with an emphasis on bhakti-rasa that the Emerald began to draw crowds. (Pulin Das, op. cit., pp. 242) Among the subsequent productions was *Bishad* which focussed once again on the ideal Hindu woman and her selfless service to her husband. What *CL* (and many others launched in its train) did was to: i) attract women and/with children to the theatre,<sup>16</sup> and, ii) allegedly unite the liberal rationalists or the western-educated with the orthodox or sectarian Vaisnavs. This second offers yet another instance of how dramatic relations are inducted into social relations and vice versa.

The upgrading of Vaisnavism in tandem with the success of *CL* has been well documented. Amongst the more enthusiastic appraisals of the play by drama critics are the notes to the play in one of the collected works of Girischandra.<sup>17</sup> Even if we disregard the plethora of superlatives (usually 'unique') used to describe the 'phenomenon' rather than the play, we are bound to take note of the writer's claim that while earlier, 'Chaitanya' had been confined to Vaisnavites alone, he (or Vaisnavism as represented by him) was now being reclaimed as a jatiya heritage. The writer argues that educated Bengalis did not hold the doctrine of prem-bhakti in any regard because of the influence of Brahmanism. But with the play, and the subsequent production of works such as Sisirkumar Ghosh's *Amiya Nimai Charit* and Nabinchandra Sen's life of Chaitanya, the *Amritabha* (1909), bhakti appealed to a new class of devotees who come to figure in the social history of neo-Vaisnavism. In Binodini Dasi's own account, there is the vivid evocation of the celebrated Bijoykrishna Goswami (1841-99) — of Brahmo persuasion if not a Brahmo — leaving his seat and dancing in a state of bhava during the performance. (AK, p. 163.) The play itself did not bring about a major social revolution as suggested in most of the accounts from theatre history. But its undoubted success and the subsequent readings of that success indicate the fertile ground of its production and reception contexts.

In the new plays of the 1880s, the explicitly religious is staged through the shift to emblematic figures — medieval as well as puranic *devotees* of Hari, rather than plots involving divine/mythological figures. It was the spectacle of faith which mattered, rather than an explication of a familiar puranic incident. In this sense, bhakti on stage was used consciously as a platform for preaching or, as a contemporary reviewer observed of Girischandra's *Nasiram*, for 'religious teaching.'

The bhakti phase marked a definite break with earlier dramatic tradition. The excessively emotional current of Vaisnavism popular in Bengal was reinducted for this new audience.<sup>18</sup> A crucial difference in the new performance context was that the saints or exemplar figures of bhakti were now being played by women (instead of boys) — the very women who were branded as 'fallen'. This had major repercussions for the hierarchy of social relations *within* the theatre world, just as it made possible the appropriation of theatre as a metaphor for the world outside of the stage — of 'Lila' being

all-pervasive. Whatever the criticism of this 'excess of Chaitanya-bhakti,' neo-Vaisnavism<sup>19</sup> in the theatre meant a crucial reorganisation of the relationship between audience and performance, between actress and the theatre, and in the recasting of familiar material as bhakti.

It appears that Brajendra Kumar Dey's claim that his *Nati Binodini* ensured the upward mobility of the jatra in 1970s (*jatey tuley dilo*) is precisely what Girischandra might have claimed to have done for the public theatre with his production of *Chaitanya Lila* in the 1880s. Bhakti as performance and spectacle is thus related to a certain caste/class mobility. In the case of *CL*, by attracting a new class of patrons to the theatre bhakti extended in turn, the sphere of selected theatre people into other more exclusive public places. Besides the privileged position that Girischandra occupied in Belur Math as the 'wayward but true' devotee of Ramakrishna, two specific instances which indicate this extended sphere may be cited: Some few years before his death, Girischandra was asked to deliver a paper on '*Gauriya Vaishnava-dharma* for the 1909 'Dharmasamannayay'. The sabha was held in the Town Hall and was presided over by the maharajah of Darbhanga. The other example consists of the posthumous honour accorded to the outcast-nat, Girischandra. The Town Hall memorial meeting after Girischandra's death in 1912 does not approach the legitimacy conferred on the Victorian stage by the granting of knighthood to another actor-manager — Irving — in 1895 and the gentrification of the East End in London, but it stands out nonetheless, for the 'public recognition' of 'Bengal's Garrick'.

## II. Role-playing and the interpretation of 'dharma'

Girischandra's staging of bhakti on the public stage and his relationship with Ramakrishna is part of a larger problematic — of reconciling his role as the outcast-bhadralok (by choice) and colonial subject-citizen at the site of the theatre industry. But it informs both the larger project of a 'national' or *jatiya* theatre as well as a relationship which is both personal and public, i.e. his relationship with Binodini, co-star and pupil. We may again refer to his essay on his 'favourite pupil, Srimati Binodini Dasi' which marks the creation of a crucial division between her achievements (which have moved others) and a to-be realized state of grace because of the benediction

by Ramakrishna. It is here and in the letters exchanged with his pupil, subsequently published in Binodini's book, that we may find Girischandra wavering between an unreserved acknowledgement of his pupil's exceptional talent and dedication and a not very convincing exhortation towards salvation. Contemporary representations of Binodini have placed the former almost entirely in the services of the latter.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth quoting from Girischandra's essay at some length:

It has been said that in all her roles, Binodini earned the praise of the public, but her life was fulfilled as Chaitanya in *Chaitanya Lila*. In this role, Binodini's performance was throughout one that would fill with bliss the mind of the devotee. Her performance of the boy Gourango, excitable and lively, would inspire *vatsalya rasa* in the devotee. In the scene featuring Dandi darshan, the spectators would be astounded at [performance of] the youth maddened with love of Radha. The manifestation of Gouranga: 'Krishna within and Radha without', the male (*prakriti*) was intertwined in the same being and the bhava specific to male nature (*purusha prakriti*) used to be manifested in Binodini. When Binodini lost consciousness, crying, 'Where is Krishna, O where is he?', one glimpsed a woman in the throes of separation. And when she was Lord Chaitanya gratifying his devotees, Binodini could bring into her role the bhava of *Purushottam*. Watching her perform many amongst the believers in the audience were so enraptured that they desired to take the dust of Binodini's feet. The Paramahansa went to see this performance. The presence of Paramahansa was proof enough that Hari himself appears wherever His name is chanted: none was deprived of his blessings. We are all fallen, but the group of the fallen began to believe that the Patitapaban, the Redeemer of the fallen is merciful towards the fallen. No doubts arose in their minds, and therefore their sinful existence was blessed indeed. Binodini was supremely blessed: the Paramahansadeb touched her with his lotus hands and had said in his blessed words, 'May your *chaitanya* (consciousness) be awakened'!<sup>21</sup> Many ascetics residing in caves and in the mountains are desirous of such a blessing. The *sadhana* that made Binodini's fate take on such a favourable turn, is precisely the kind of dedication that the actor has to exhibit if he wishes to prepare himself for acting. Binodini succeeded by keeping herself completely immersed, body and soul, in thoughts of the Mahapurush [Chaitanya]. Any person,



whatsoever be his situation, if he but contemplate this grand scene will gradually move towards the path of salvation and will eventually gain liberation. Binodini's contemplation of Gouranga, day and night, from morning to evening, yielded fruit. ('Srimati Binodini and the Bengal Stage', Ibid.)

Binodini's own words testify also to the intensity of performance:

The samkirtan I danced as one possessed. On some days it came to such a pass that unable to bear the pressure of performance I would faint on stage. (AK. p. 49.)

The actress or the actor becoming the character s/he plays is part of universal acting lore, but Girischandra's commentary on Binodini's enactment of the dual incarnation of the performer and performance has to be understood in the light of Vaisnava aesthetic theology: [T]he Vrindavana goswamins of Caitanyaism implicitly accept Caitanya's identity with Kṛṣṇa, even if they explicitly declare only his avatartva; and to explain this identity, they indulge in the mystical devotional fancy of the dual incarnation of Caitanya...the external Radha incarnation containing in itself the internal Kṛṣṇa in essence...establishing as a doctrine the theory of dual incarnation.' (De, Ibid., pp. 444-45.)

Roop Goswami used the language of the *Natyasastra* to define the life of bhakti whose ultimate aim is a transformation of identity. Thus, a religious life is conceptualised in terms of a dramatic theory and interactive bhakti is constituted by the imitation or the enactment (through internalisation) of a transcendent role defined by a paradigmatic individual.<sup>22</sup>

Interactive bhakti in this case has several other dimensions which we might summarise as follows:

1. the character being represented (Chaitanya) is known to have often taken on 'Radha-bhava' or 'become Radha'; Chaitanya often took the part of Radha in jatra performances; those watching the performance were thereby moved to a state of religious sublimation;<sup>23</sup>

2. it posits that Binodini Dasi as Chaitanya undergoes a transformation herself, just as s/he is successful in 'imprinting dev-bhava' in the minds of the spectators. The latter comprise the believers and devotees who have advised her, as well as those 'ordinary people' who moved by the performance come to take the dust off her feet after the show;



3. the presence of Ramakrishna adds yet another crucial component: transformation combines with personal revelation so that exit of the fallen but blessed woman from the stage may be subsequently read as a public signal of national (jatiya) regeneration.

Interactive bhakti is particularly suited to the entire practice of theatrical representation; it was refracted brilliantly in literary representations of the repentant fallen woman in theatre journals. The most striking example of the power of theatre as a moral force occurs in the serialised novella, 'Othello (A Story).'<sup>24</sup> An excerpt from the dying woman's confession to the morally impeccable actor:

I went to see a performance at your theatre sometime last year. They were playing the Bilwa-mangal pala that day. I had never before seen 'Bilwa-mangal'. But when I saw Bilwa-mangal that night I was completely lost; it was as if I could see with my bright eyes all the tragic scenes from my past and present...it is as though I have become a new person after that night last year.

(*Naryamandir*, 3rd year, Sraban, BS 1319, p. 230-31.)

The division between actor and audience is continually blurred in bhakti aesthetics; in the instance of *Chaitanya Lila*, the play house becomes almost an upgraded *akhra*. The separation of space and labour in the construction of a specific spectacle is undercut by the actual performance circuit where the bhaktas direct, instruct and applaud that play; the player herself represents a supreme bhakta. In the process, there is an apparent circumvention of the nexus of producer and consumer as two ends of a transaction or production process. The bhakta may be both spectator and participant.

The intersections of the professional and the aesthetic- devotional in the practice of proscenium theatre in the late nineteenth-century Bengal have made for ironic readings. Drama critics of the last century such as Sureshchandra Samajpati (ill-famed editor of *Sahitya*), as well as contemporary critics such as Rabindranath Bandopadhyay have identified the *barangana-nati* as a figure inspiring the ultimate conversion model in Girischandra's plays;<sup>25</sup> she who is the object of desire or lust, moves with her faith, the heart of the desiring subject towards desire for god. Chintamoni, the prostitute turned devotee in *Bilwamangal* (18886) is perhaps the best-known and most frequently cited example in support of this thesis. The spectacle of *Chaitanya Lila* — when Binodini played the part — as well as representations and reverberations of that spectacle

upto the present time continue to thrill precisely because of this role playing — the fallen woman playing the saint and *becoming* pure by virtue of the power of role-playing etc. The prejudice against the actress then is actually converted to admiration. Even a contemporary theatre scholar Ajit Ghosh concludes that Binodini's tremendous success in the role of Chintamani stemmed from her actually having lived through that experience — the transition from prostitute to a spiritually superior being.<sup>26</sup> (This is the same argument — in reverse — as Promothonath Bishi's, about the absence of the grihastree in Girischandra's plays.)

Against formulations of women as *avidya* or *kamini*; the *barangana-nati* as *avidya* and *maya*, but also '*bohurupee ishwar*', whether in the recorded sayings of Ramakrishna to his devotees such as Girischandra, or in Girischandra's own play-texts and productions, and finally in the interpretation and readings of the latter, we may introduce the texts by Binodini Dasi herself. These texts offer both internalised acceptance as well as rejections of not merely the above mentioned formulations, but the formulaic ending itself, as when Binodini reworks an exemplary incident from Girischandra's play-text into her autobiography. The theatrical model of vision, sound and movement, i.e. language *and* spectacle that Girischandra envisaged and produced was one that included affect: Girischandra offers the classic (and historical) example of the prostitute-temptress (*beshya-mohini*) who was sent to 'deceive' the 'Bhagvad-bhakt Haridas' but was herself converted into a supreme vaishnavi (*param viashnavi*). Compassion not hate, 'motherly love' not erudition or scholarliness (i.e. not jnana marg) may achieve such a transformation, says *Giris*.<sup>27</sup>

The 'Yavan Haridas' incident is a text-book illustration of two kinds of 'otherness' being subsumed in the intensity of faith and we may therefore digress briefly in order to juxtapose readings of Haridas against the formulation of the *patita-nati*. We are told that Haridas was 'a convert from Islam and a Sufi epitome of Vaisnava humility and strength...[he] was betrayed to the Muslim rulers by jealous Brahmans and whipped because of his apostasy through twenty-two market places, a brutal punishment through which he lived only because of his deep faith'.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, as noted by Ramakanta Chakrabarty, 'Both biographers and playwrights seem to have been attracted by the story of the Yavan Haridas.'<sup>29</sup> The incident

is presented in Giris's play in 1884 in the form of a conversation between other devotees: here, the final proof of the miracle of Haridas is the conversion of the prostitute/courtesan who renounces everything in order to chant the name of Hari: *Ebe beshya param baishnavi/ hae sarbatyagi Haripada-anuragi/ dibanishi kore se sadhon.* (CL, Act. III, sc. 1.)

A gloss on 'Yavan', the first half of the convert-disciple's hyphenated identity, yields several histories. Originally a geographical term of reference, meaning a 'West Asian',<sup>30</sup> by the nineteenth century Yavan ('Jaban' in Bangla) was used as a homogenous and increasingly pejorative term for Muslims.<sup>31</sup> In the present context therefore, Haridas's own conversion and subsequent proselytising activities take on added power because of the origins [Muslim] ascribed to him and the trials he undergoes in order to establish his faith in Chaitanya and consequently his Vaisnav identity. These trials are political and sexual respectively: he convinces the king, and in an interesting reversal of such representations in pauranic narratives where the sage always succumbs to the celestial courtesan *sent* to deflect him from his tapas or route of empowerment, Haridas converts the temptress sent to seduce him, by his own example and not by any active persuasion. Thus the ex-courtesan in the Yavan-Haridas story herself becomes a powerful symbol of faith.

Within Binodini's narrative (AK) the familiar exemplum functions only as an ironic reminder of what did *not* happen in the case of one who had internalised and played to perfection the role of the saint. The full force of this irony is evident if we read the question of 'purpose' as one initiating the autobiography, and the desire to understand or evaluate the worth of work, or to even redefine the definition of work (as *karya*) its subtext.

### III. Between Labour and Pleasure: Representation of Gender

Unlike theatre in London, proscenium theatre in the colonial metropolis did not move towards a leisure industry, i.e. a significant, and growing, branch of waged production for many workers. Theatre going as an activity continued vulnerable despite the legitimacy accorded by Ramakrishna's visit. The *nati*'s dilemma is to be situated in the 'leisure label' and therefore be stigmatised but actually having to work towards the production of that leisure for an extended

consuming class. Besides the single lascivious male (or the stereotypical babu of an earlier era) there is increasingly a contingent of 'the theatre-going family' primarily from the mofussils. One's own redemption and the conversion or 'winning over' of others, particularly initially unbelieving and hostile 'spectators' (such as the Jagat-Madhai duo in *CL*), marks the theatre as a vehicle for morality, rather than a cultural production aimed at satisfying the consumer's need for leisure.<sup>32</sup>

Redemption occupied a somewhat different and complex place in Chhanchandra's interpretation of bhakti for the actress. It involved spiritual salvation in and through work. By valorising the actress's commitment to her profession and linking theatre itself to a national (religious-social) cause, bhakti-in-performance attempted to work out a plot for the 'condemned woman'. But reviews such as the one below, written in 1888, the highwater mark of the bhakti years, suggest how the continuing note of condemnation constituted also the official nationalist voice. When the pradeshik session of the Congress took place in the British Indian Association Hall from 25-27 October 1888, the Bina theatre was asked to perform for the delegates on 26 October. The *Bengali* carried an account (in English in the original) on 1 November:

'the Delegates who attended Provincial Conference were entertained at the Vina Theatre. More than a hundred Delegates were present...Chandras was followed by a political piece which had been composed for the occasion...the need for the thorough union between the Hindus and the Mohammedans was insisted upon in eloquent terms...we have reasons to know that the Delegates have formed a most favourable information of the histrionic powers of the Vina Theatre Company. In this connection, we desire to advocate the claims of Vina Theatre to public patronage. It is the only Indian Theatre in the town where there are no female actresses. No one objects to female actresses provided they come from the respectable class [sic] of society. But in the present circumstance of the Indian Society that is not possible; and the result is that female characters are represented by woman of questionable virtue. The noblest characters in Hindoo traditions — Sita, Sabitri and Damayanti — are too often represented by those who have not the smallest pretensions to their purity and their womanly devotion. It seems to us to be an outrage upon Hindoo sentiment that such exalted characters in the

Hindoo legends should be represented by women of the town. The *Indian* stage needs to be reformed: and we are glad to note that the Vina theatre under the auspices of Babu Rajkristo Roy, has set an example which is worthy of all praise and richly deserving of public encouragement.'<sup>33</sup> [Emphasis added.]

*Performance: Work as Pleasure*

In its contemporary version, redemption only iconises, so that even its enabling features are completely obscured. It is important to address more specifically the self-worth derived from *the pleasure of performance* even as we contend with the apparently inevitable objectification of the performing woman.

'No one but a churl — in fact no one at all — can fail to be pleased, flattered, touched to the heart by the spontaneous admiration of the public. To escape from one's self every night, to thrill with emotions...to be another woman is the fullness of joy. To feel the electric current of sympathy play back and forth across the footlights is well, it is an intoxication of pleasure'.

Ethel Barrymore, 'The Young Girl and the Stage',<sup>34</sup>

Binodini's writings comprise more than her observations on *karya* and *faith* (fate). They glow with the pleasure of her craft; the physical and emotional thrill of performance: and her pleasure in the company of theatre folk. *Amar Katha* brings alive for her readers her debut many decades after the event:

When I saw before me the rows of shining lights, and the eager excited gaze of a thousand eyes, my entire body became bathed in sweat, my heart began to beat dreadfully, my legs were actually trembling and it seemed to me that the dazzling scene was clouding before my eyes. Backstage, my teachers tried to assure me. Along with fear, anxiety and excitement, a certain eagerness too appeared to overwhelm me. How I shall describe this feeling? For one, I was a little girl and then too, the daughter of poor people. I had never had occasion to perform or even appear before such a gathering. (AK)

In *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, written even later, she queries,

Why do I try and polish back to their original brightness the rusty memories of those old days? There is no answer. I cannot find an answer. But it seems to me, that when I was little, my pure mind was first deeply steeped/dyed in red, so many coloured years have failed



to remove that original red which lingers on even now in my mist-ridden mind. It is a colour which seeps in through the curtains of time and still continues to show itself in glimpses in the recesses of my mind. And so, whenever I speak, I remember before anything else all those days which are still as sweet to me as honeyed dreams, the power and scent of whose intoxication I cannot yet forget, which will remain perhaps my closest companion to the last days of my life.

Perhaps that is why the desire to speak of my life as an actress. (AK)

The actress did accept for the most part, the edict which made her a *patita*, but, I have suggested that the many-layered text of the actress's dharma by which she lives and works comprises pleasure and pride in performance. This is dharma defined as a profession, emerging from both an acceptance and a rejection of her subordinate position. It affords us the possibility of reading the actress as a *social actor*, in however limited ways. The morality play of late 20th century through the evocation of *CL* overwrites this text, so that at the individual level, it is *only* the sense of sin(fulness) which remains, since this alone can initiate redemption. It is not surprising that in the interests of the project of redemption, Binodini can only be cast as either *patita* or *bhadramahila* or both, but little or no space can be accorded either to her sense of identity as a *cultural worker who is a woman* or to the conflicting ideologies she represents, enacts and lives. Thus, even if the actress's commitment to theatre is acknowledged, the incidents around the 'naming of the Star Theatre' can be read, at best, as a sensational case of an individual betrayal in a plot of conflicting personal passions, in which case, the main accused is that ubiquitous 'womanly' sentiment: Binodini's *abhimān* (feelings of wounded pride or hurt). Redemption may not grant to the actress the pleasure she derives from and is able to give to others from her profession, despite the hard work, and the economic and physical hardships it entails. The morality play actually obliterates all traces of steps painfully taken by the actress towards gaining worth in/through work.

To return therefore to the problematic sketched in the preceding sections, that of committed labour (*sadhana*) and merit as worth (*mulya*) as the desired goal, there appears to be a strong indication that the social stigma of the actress is related to and indeed derived from the stigma of independent wage earning.<sup>35</sup> The taint is that of professionalism (which I would hesitate to make synonymous with



*chakri*). Once these very virtues of labour, dedication, commitment are in the service of interactive bhakti — we have a dharma that is beneficent for player and spectator, so that finally, both roles may be merged. This is an oblique attempt to counter the anti-theatrical diatribe that for decades read the actress's body as the source and site of licentiousness. This view of the performing woman conceded that occupational status for the female performer is premised on two desired ideals: 1) her use of the theatre and superior roles (*unnata charitra*) to practice dharma for individual salvation, and for affecting her audience through her enactment of the superior character; and, 2) on the ideal [male spectatorial gaze] which sees her as a *patra* (vehicle) for his own salvation. In either case, the political and to some extent, the social, are undercut by this emphasis on *devbhava* which can be successfully roused only when the actress plays to perfection another role. So that while her 'real life' *patita* status is to serve only as a reminder of the constant need for redemption, the 'becoming' mode (i.e. becoming an exemplary bhakta) erases the politics of labour in the workplace. The *patita* as a generic category, cannot be represented other than as a necessary given or find any but a negative or absent perspective on women's sexuality.

#### IV. The place of the *patita*: agenda versus agency

*Binod*: ...It is because of your kindness that I have come to this *teerthsthan* for my *sadhana*. Let me carry on peacefully with my *sadhana*.

*Amrit*: Your *sadhana* has come to fruition [*siddhilabh*]. Gurmukh Rai...will build us a theatre for twenty thousand rupees...He wants you in return.

(Dey, *NB*, pp. 38-39.)

When Brajendra Kumar Dey produces *Nati Binodini* in the 1970s, he can actually refer to an existing aesthetic-religious discourse and play constantly on the keywords mentioned in the introduction to this essay. By marking them with irony when they are used by the 'bad' or ambiguous characters, Dey reworks them into the language of melodrama. Of course, the double entendre on *teerthsthan*, *sadhana* and so on, is also drawing on a satiric tradition of 'babu literature'. Bankimchandra's enumeration of the range of meanings encoded in the word 'babu' in a much quoted essay of that name, critiques the

piety of a generation which thrives on 'novel-natak'... 'for whom the National Theatre is a *teerthsthan*' (BR, Vol. II, pp. 11-12).

But there is another 'straight' tradition grounded in theatre history, present also in standard histories of drama. As insider accounts, they indicate both the place of theatre in national life and the place assigned to Binodini in these readings in their retrospective evaluations of the significance of *Chaitanya Lila*. As we shall see, the proper subject of these writings is never Binodini Dasi, although she is an indispensable component in that representation.

Among others, Giris's famous contemporary, Amritalal Basu, was to eulogise several decades later on the impact of the play. In '*Puratan filer ekkhani pata: Chaitanyalila ki kariache*' (A page from an old file: What *Chaitanya Lila* has accomplished) (1924), Amritalal hailed the first performance for its role in awakening 'the slumbering Hindu' and spreading a gospel of universal love, so that 'in every village, city and locality was heard the Gita, '*Chaitanya Charit* and the *samkirtan*'. 'The foreign-returned English-educated Bengali' turned to the religion of the masses and 'declared without shame and with pride that he was Hindu Hindu Hindu'. Turning more specifically to the theatre world, Amritalal declared: [W]hen the lowly actress *in the guise of Sri Chaitanya* enacted his lila, then our humble stage was transformed into a veritable paradise and when the performance was viewed by another avatar, Sri Ramakrishna of Dakhineswar then we were truly blessed... The stage is now indeed a holy place (*teerthsthan*). (Emphasis added)<sup>36</sup>

Similar sentiments are to be found in the standard biography of Girischandra written in 1927 by Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay who had been Boswell and Ganesh in the last decades of the dramatist's life. 'It was at an auspicious moment when by writing this play Girischandra made New Bengal — proud of its western education — and shaven-headed Vaisnavs, wearing the proper mark on their foreheads, sit together [on the same seat] and weep'.<sup>37</sup> Despite the familiar language of a communal emotion — the ecstatic tears for example, what we have in this graphic image of a bridging of ideologies, is the picture of a new urban-based *madhyabitto* community. It is not very different from the perceived role of Ramakrishna in the context of colonial India, as expressed for instance in Saradananda's evaluation of his guru: '[Ramakrishna brought]...back the western educated Indians who had strayed into the

instance in Saradananda's evaluation of his guru: '[Ramakrishna brought]...back the western educated Indians who had strayed into the blind alley of rationalist scepticism and materialist aspirations back into the Hindu religious-spiritual fold.'<sup>38</sup>

When the Chaitanya incident appears in *Rangalaye Trish Batsar* (1933), Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay's (1876-1934) memoirs of thirty years of his life in the public theatre, it is in order to delineate the extraordinary 'mediating role' played by the dramaturg-devotee Girischandra Ghosh in bringing *back* the devotional as the proper subject of drama to the stage.<sup>39</sup> Mukhopadhyay's thesis lies in defining the 'poison of English education' and its corrosive influence on the Bengali mind. In his argument, the Chaitanya incident allows for a dissolving of barriers between indigenous traditions and adaptations derived from the West; as an example of the latter he cites the works of Michael Madhusudan (1824-73) which continued for long to be the staple of the public theatre, though as we showed earlier, not without significant changes. In Apareshchandra's version (as in Abinashchandra's) Binodini loses her name and more significantly, even her identity as an actress and simply becomes, 'a prostitute' (*barangana*) (Ibid. pp. 70-71). The person of the actress is presented as the familiar persona of the patita and is ultimately transformed into a synecdoche. The salvation of an individual (here designated as patita) becomes a metaphor for the regeneration of the public theatre and the renaissance of an entire jati — viz. the Bengali people.

Mukhopadhyay's commendation of the priest-like function of Girischandra in ushering in a renaissance of the 'Bengali heart/mind' by bringing bhakti into the theatre, harks back to the 'purpose' versus 'pleasure' argument of the theatre, as well as suggesting the recovery of recovering hitherto-excluded indigenous tradition. Modern metropolitan entertainment has to bow down before the upsurge of faith and the familiar representation of that faith. The demarcation of time, space and moral state: 'tainted' versus 'pure', of 'fallen' versus 'saved', in the person of the patita-nati and in the moment of benediction is a logical culmination of Apareshchandra's descriptions of theatre life as a 'delightful hell of this life' (*theater ehogagater narak*). We may note by the way, the fixed spatial location of *narak*, rather than a punitive but potentially regenerative rebirth related to *karmaphal*, since this is related to the patita-nati being objectified as

(and in some ways, also perceiving herself as) 'an insect of hell' (*naraker keet*).<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Mukhopadhyay uses exactly the same language as Girischandra's biographer and Amritalal Basu to underline the significance of Ramakrishna's presence in the theatre: 'The Lord Srisri Ramakrishna's footsteps transformed the Bengali theatre into a pilgrimage place.' (Ibid. p. 71).

Contemporary, and arguably more radical theatre practitioners such as Utpal Dutt (1929-93) have not been able to move any further away from the prostitute-actress construct and its particular role in the representations of Nati Binodini, despite other, more self-consciously probing representations of the actress in plays such as *Tiner Talwar* (1971). In a recent monograph on Girischandra Ghosh brought out by Sahitya Akademi (1992), Binodini figures in Dutt's narrative only as an object or recipient of the catholicity of Ramakrishna's beliefs; ultimately, both Ramakrishna and Binodini are used in a project to rescue Girischandra from the charges of writing only for the box office. Dutt's critique of the 'bourgeois prejudices of the Indian middle-class' and championing of Ramakrishna has resulted in Binodini being recast in accordance with the very bourgeois norms critiqued by him. 'It was probably his *joie de vivre* that brought Ramakrishna frequently to the theatre, to Giris's plays in particular', suggests Dutt, contrasting this with the 'hate- campaign' of the 'bourgeois puritans against the immortality of the theatre':

But the "illiterate", "superstitious" Ramakrishna chose this moment to visit Giris's theatre and bless the actress Binodini by touching her, and to hell with what the most potent, [sic] grave and reverend signiors thought about it. To a Vedantist "prostitute" is not a repulsive animal, but as Ramakrishna realized while praying to Kali that it was the Mother who had assumed the appearance of prostitute. In ecstasy he had asked her, "Mother, you are also in them?"

And in answer to questions from puritans, he asserted: He has become everything — everyone is divine. All women are mothers. I see no difference between prostitute and faithful housewife. [English original]<sup>41</sup>

In many respects, Dutt's isolation of the incident and recontextualising it in his reading of the history of the public theatre in Bengal is more open to critical scrutiny than any of the readings cited so far. Firstly, Dutt uses unquestioningly, the overarching metaphor of 'the Mother' to laud Ramakrishna's erasure of the

conventional distinctions, even polarisation, between prostitute and housewife. The all-subsuming category of the mother appears to be the only one within which *other* bourgeois categories of womanhood may be *sublimated*, leaving no place for locating or identifying other categories of a femininity which includes sexuality. (Ramakrishna blesses Binodini as *ma*, commonly used in Bangla as a sign of either affection or respect, depending on the age and status of the addressor and addressee.) Secondly, by linking Ramakrishna's acceptance of the prostitute as the Mother (goddess Kali) with his state of ecstasy, a privileged, even rarified state (of mind and body) is posited against the less inspired and more workaday sphere from which the bourgeois express their attitudes of contempt or prurient curiosity. There appears to be no other alternatives to these two spheres presented in oppositional terms — between those of the mystic and the bourgeois puritan. And finally, of course, there is the avowed nature of Dutt's project, which is to redeem Girishchandra, the dramatist-dramaturg from charges of populism. This results in a rather extreme evaluation of either the scope or the actual achievement of the public theatre:

Giris, earlier in his career dissipated much of his energy in wild living and absence of a purpose. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda gave him a serious aim — “educating the masses”, as Ramakrishna put it, in patriotism and love of humanity, sympathy for the downtrodden, and the great democracy of the Vedanta.<sup>42</sup>

However laudable this aim (even if one were to desist from exploring the ‘great democracy of the Vedanta’), until the gana-natya movement of the forties of this country, theatre in Bengal could not and did not really attempt to ‘educate the masses’. The point has been noted frequently enough but it needed one of theatre's most talented and committed practitioners — Manoranjan Bhattacharyya (1889-1954) — to analyse the precise reach of the public theatre.<sup>43</sup>

Utpal Dutt's sympathetic awareness of the conflicting social contexts of the actress, her mentors and patrons of theatre had been evident in that delightful play, *Tiner Talwar* (The Tin Sword), which also problematized most powerfully through the device of the play within the play, the political project of the public theatre in its early decades. It is perhaps the project of reclaiming social and political consciousness for Giris Ghosh or for Ramakrishna that makes Dutt singularly reductive in this inexorable gravitation to a binary model,



unlike, for example, Upendranath Vidyabhushan, who wrote the biographies of three famous actresses (including Binodini) in the early decades of this century. We are obliged to confront here the ideology of forms, although it might seem extreme to split Dutt into playwright and critic and to suggest that it is really as the former that he adopts the more critical role.<sup>44</sup>

Girischandra's *Chaitanya Lila*, based on Brindavan Das's *Chaitanya Bhagavat*, depicted the early life of Chaitanya and ended with his renunciation of sansar. The 1884 production at the Star Theatre set the trend for the 'biographical-devotional' on the public stage. Binodini Dasi's performance as Bengal's most charismatic saint and her untimely retirement from the stage was to determine subsequent readings of her life, even against the grain of her own writings. The 1880s marked the period of the educated Bengali's increasing disillusionment with the Raj: the search for a regional and national identity took on a distinct shape in the public theatre. The casting of the stage actress as the patita-bhakta came about partly through Girischandra's own historical location; it was his embattled response to the commodification of pleasure and of female sexuality. It is worth investigating how our readings continue to be recast in the same mould.

[The above is an excerpt from a study, first published as an Occasional Paper, University of Chicago, December 1993, and forthcoming as a monograph from Seagull Publications. I am grateful to Sibaji Bandopadhyay and Dr. Amiya Deb for its present form. All translations from the Bangla are by the author.]

## NOTES

1. '*Bangla Rangamanche Srimati Binodini*' ('Srimati Binodini on the Bengali Stage') (1913) in GR, 1991, Vol. 5, pp. 363-369, also reprinted as an appendix in Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, eds. *Amar Katha o Anyanya Rachana* by Binodini Dasi (Calcutta : Subarnarekha, 1987). The use of 'Srimati' by Girish Ghosh in the title and elsewhere in the essay may be noted.

2. *Natyamandir*, the theatre journal in which part of Binodini's autobiography was first serialised as 'Ek Abhinetrir Jiban' ('The Life of an Actress') was targeted both at the theatre-going audience as well as those



who would be curious about theatre gossip, but might not necessarily be regular theatre-goers. Most articles of this magazine as well as other theatre magazines such as *Roop o Rong* were by male writers who regularly wrote fictitious first-person lives of women, usually 'lives' of actress-like figures. See Rimli Bhattacharya, 'Actress Stories and the 'Female' Confessional voice in Bengali Theatre Magazines, 1910-25' in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, Issue 5, May 1995.

3. Sukumar Sen, *Battalar Chhapa o Chhabi* (1984) (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1989), p. 73.

4. *Reis and Rayyet*, review dt. October 10, 1885. Cited by Debiprasad Bhattacharyya in *Giris Rachanabali*, Vol. II, (1971), (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1985), Introduction, p. xxxiv. Olcott's pointed reference to the 'medical man', the modern man of science at the service of devotional performance, may be complemented by Binodini's account of Father Lafont's visit to the theatre for a performance of *CL* (AK, pp. 49-50).

5. GR, Intro. pp. xxxiv-vi.

6. 'In the London of the 1880s mysticism was being taken up by the young and enquiring. There was a Theosophical Society, founded by Madame Blavatsky, a Rosicrucian Society, a Hermetic Society, a Society for Physical Research...' Shella Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London, Methuen: 1990), p. 27.

7. J.S. Bratton, Allen Cave et al, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage: 1790-1930*, (Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 166. Note 33 further informs us 'Arnold was the editor of the *daily Telegraph*, and a noted orientalist, and Tory.' (p.178)

8. Amiya Sen, *Hindu Revival in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 334.

9. See in particular, Girischandra's 'Nater Abedan' (The Actors Plea', BS 1307) and 'Bartaman Rangabhumii' (The Contemporary Theatre Scene, BS 1308) in GR Vol. I, pp. 235-38, 742-45.

10. Hemendranath Dasgupta, *Bharatiya Natyamanch* (Calcutta: Bangabhasha Sanskriti Sammelan, 1945), pp. 37-38.

11. Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Fontana Press: 1986), p. 135.

12. The most recent cassette comprises eight songs interspersed with bits of dialogue and assumes an audience familiar with 'Nati Binodini's' lifestory. The cover features Binodini, 'Ranga-babu' and Ramakrishna. (*Nati Binodini*, Dinen Gupta, Nibedita Films, 1993). Bina Dasgupta's brochure prints dozen verses from the songs in the production. (*Nati Binodini*, Directed by Bina Dasgupta, Produced by Surangana, 1991).

13. On fainting fits and swoons on stage and off, 'acted' and 'real' and their role in the creation of a star status see Cornelia Otis Skinner's sensitive and happily irreverent biography of Sarah Bernhardt, *Madame Sarah* (1966), (New York: Paragon Publisher, 1988).

14. 'Ram -dada': *Bhaktachuramoni swargiya Ramchandra Dutta* originally published in the *Tatwamanjuri*, BS 1311) in *GR*, Vol. V, 1991, p. 290-95.

15. Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 237. Most of the actresses appear to have come from a vaisnav background and had a fairly informal religious upbringing. An early initiation and sometimes as in the case of Binodini, an early marriage, seems to have been the norm. Binodini refers to herself as a 'jat vaisnav' (AK) a caste specific to Bengal and an off shoot of the Gauriya Vaisnav sect. Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981), p. 31.

16. Samik Bandopadhyay among others, also underlines that the period of Bhakti revival (1880s-90s) and the attraction of women spectators to the Bhakti plays coincided with the virtual disappearance of the 'women's question' in the public sphere. Bandopadhyay, 'Girischandra Ghosh: *Parinatiparva: Bhaktabhaktimahatva*' in *Proma*, October 1980, pp. 109-119.

17. *GR*, Ramen Chaudhury ed., Vol IV, 1966, Appendix.

18. On Rammohan and Bankimchandra's 'aversion' for the excesses of Vaisnavism and the difference between Vaisnavism and Bankimchandra's Vishnuism, see Sumit Sarkar's 'Calcutta and the Bengali Renaissance' in *Calcutta: The Living City*, Sukanta Chaudhuri ed. (Calcutta University Press, 1991), Vol. 2, esp. pp. 101-2.

19. See Debipada Bhattacharya, *Bangla Charit Sahitya*, 1982, p. 249.

20. Sadhan Guha attempts to break through the construct of the nati in his evaluation of Binodini's poetry by juxtaposing the woman Binodini with the poet Binodini, as indicated in the title of his essay, '*Nati Binodini: Kabi Binodini*' in *Group Theatre*, No. 4, May-July 1988. But in the process, he also creates a special woman's sphere which is removed from the worth of work or the pleasure of performance experienced by the actress. Guha's essay on Binodini nevertheless stands out in the corpus of 'Binodini writing' for attempting to question the usually, already given *patita* status and for relating it to both to patriarchal structure of her society and to the 'revivalist Hinduism' espoused by Girischandra. Unfortunately none of these points are developed into an argument.

21. Girischandra also refers to the incident in slightly more general terms in his essay '*Abhinetrir Samalochana* ('Criticism of the Actress) in *GR*, Vol. III, p. 825.

22. For a detailed account of the differences between Abhinavagupta and Rupa Goswamin or adaptations by the latter of aesthetic concepts into religious experience see David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: a Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana*, (NY, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

23. Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Katha*, p. 169.

24. In the final instalment the author, Monilal Bandopadhyay acknowledges that his story is based on 'a famous English novel', *Natya-mandir*. Ashar, BS 1320, No. 12, p. 929.

25. Sureshchandra Samajpati, *Sahitya*, Baisakh, BS 1297; Rabindranath Bandopadhyay, *Bangla Sahitye Pauranic Natak*, (Kalyani University, 1990?). pp. 144-45.

26. Ajit Ghosh, *Bangla Natyabhinayer Itihas*, (Calcutta: 1985), pp. 145-46.

27. *GR*, Vol. III, p. 827.

28. Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, (1966), (University of Chicago, 1991), p. 113. Dimock adds 'the extent to which the Vaisnavas were persecuted by the Muslims is largely open'. (fn. 24).

29. Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal: 1486- 1900*, (Calcutta Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985).

30. Romila Thapar, 'It is worth noticing, for example, that in the important early encounter between religious sects in India and Islam, Muslims were rarely referred to as such. The terms used were wither ethnic Turuska (Turk) or geographical Yavan/West Asian. A very different perception of the 'other'.' *Cultural Transactions and Early India* (Oxford India Paperbacks, 1987), p. 22.

31. Tapan Raichaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, op. cit., p. 41.

32. Eileen and Stephen Yeo, 'Ways of Seeing: Control and Leisure versus Class and Struggle' in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1500-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure*, Eileen Yeo & Stephen Yeo eds. (Sussex, Harvester Press, 1981).

33. Cited by Shankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upadan*, pp. 294-6.

34. *Harper's Bazar* XI, (December 1906), p. 1000 cited in Albert Auster, *Actresses and Suffragists: Women in the American Theatre, 1890-1920*, (New York Praeger, 1984).

35. Despite the tendency for Victorian performers to be credited with increasing respectability and middleclass status and for the actors to receive the highest official commendation, the popular association between actress and prostitutes and belief in actresses' inappropriate sexual conduct endured... because the Victorians recognised that acting and whoring were the occupations of self-sufficient women who plied their trade in public places...both were objects of desire whose company was purchased through commercial exchange.' Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

36. *Roop o Rang*, No. 1, 18 Ashwin, BS 1331, pp. 2-3. A similar sentiment is found in his memorial poem on Girischandra, read at the Kohinoor Theatre prior to the evening's performance. Published in the *Natya Mandir*, BS 1319.

37. Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay, *Girischandra*, p. 198.

38. Cited by Tapan Raychaudhuri, op. cit., p. 231.

39. Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay, *Rangalaye Trish Batsar*, Swapan Majumdar ed. (Calcutta: 1972), p. 71.

40. AK, p. 50.

41. Utpal Dutt, *Giris Chandra Ghosh*, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), p. 54.

42. Dutt, op. cit., p. 55. *Tiner Talwar* was also written as a salute to the heroic founders of the public theatre. See also Dutt's longer study of Girischandra's plays in *Giris Manas* for a more impassioned defence of the playwright. Here, Dutt also questions the criteria by which canons of 'literary' history are formed, by trying to establish Giris's political project in his plays and through his theatre practice: Sukumar Sen, considered to be foremost literary historian of Bangla is attacked for using 'Victorian aesthetics and ethics' to evaluate a 'desiya' playwright as Giris Ghosh.

43. See in particular Pramathanath Bisi's introduction to *Giris-rachanasambhar* (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh, 1963), which emphasises the limited middle-class and lower-middle class appeal of his plays. Manoranjan Bhattacharyya, 'Janagan o Theater' in *Theater o Anyanya Prasanga*, Dibyanarayan Bhattacharya ed. (Calcutta: Pratikshan Publications, 1987). Bhattacharyya was a stage and film actor, critic, political worker and later, founder member of Bohurupee, he also played Ramakrishna in one of the many Ramakrishna films.

44. Sumit Sarkar's gloss on this scene in 'Kaliyuga' although similarly situated in a study of Ramakrishna and not Binodini, emerges from an entirely different perspective. Juxtaposing the construction of sexuality

among the late 19th century bhadrakalok in Calcutta and Ramakrishna's responses to this ideology, Sarkar observes, 'Sex in such a degraded form was presumably an object of pity and grace, not a threat — and perhaps for a man who found even sex in marriage intolerable, prostitution was not all that specially repugnant.' This and other related comments on Ramakrishna's relationship to women and the place of women in his discourse, open up different entry points into the study of religion and gender relations. However, the description of Binodini's autobiography as 'a moving, if somewhat flamboyantly *repentant account* of her life as prostitute and actress' suggests that the benediction scene continues to cast its own shadow, despite the care taken by Sarkar to separate prostitute and actress. 'Kaliyuga', pp. 1556-57. (Emphasis added).

## **THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936-39): Its Treatment in André Malraux's *Man's Hope*, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.**

*Jalal Uddin Khan*

The Spanish Civil War, from 1936 to 1939, is the culmination of over a hundred years of political unrest in that country.<sup>1</sup> Immediately preceding the Second World War, its impact can hardly be exaggerated in terms of its political and military as well as intellectual and literary dimensions. For the first time in modern history, there was an ideological war in which the Spanish military under the command of General Franco, leagued with the rightist conservatives, monarchists, landowners, and the Roman Catholics assumed dictatorial power, determined to overthrow the democratically elected ruling Republican government comprising liberals and radicals, socialists and communists. The coalition government was not a strong one because of its internal conflict and failed to bring about the desired progress in the life of the masses. However, it tried its very best to do what it could to save liberty and freedom in the face of overwhelming fascist onslaughts aimed at returning the country to the previous nationalistic and aristocratic order. "More than any other crisis of the country," the civil war in Spain brought out "the incipient political philosophies and humanitarian hopes of an extremely social-conscious generation."<sup>2</sup> As a result, it provided for a test of modern political theories in practice. Apart from letting to surface why and how those theories were good in practical reality, it also exposed what was lacking in them and what was dangerous about them. In the words of Martin Gellhorn, then a young American novelist visiting the war-torn Spain,

the men who fought and those who died for the Republic, whatever their nationality and whether they were communists, anarchists, socialists, poets, plumbers, middle-class professional men ... were brave and disinterested as there were no rewards in Spain. They were fighting for us all, against the combined force of European fascism. They deserved our thanks and our respect and got neither.

All of us who believed in the cause of the Republic will mourn the Republic's defeat and the death of its defenders, forever, and will

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continue to love the land of Spain and the beautiful people, who are among the noblest and luckiest on earth.<sup>3</sup>

The Civil War broke out in July 1936. It was a "political war", described by Hillaire Belloc who took the side of the conservatives as a "a battle between Christ and anti-Christ". The particular aspect of this bloody struggle that most strongly gripped the imagination of the trans-Atlantic public was that for the first time in this country, "a total war," involving the entire population, was waged with modern weapons and tactics, with modern political concepts standing between the opposing forces. It was a war thought to be just and necessary and worth fighting in by all those who believed in the cause of humanity and human dignity. Consequently, though fought in a particular country among its own people, the war immediately assumed a wider proportion throughout Europe and America and aroused tremendous passions in the contemporary literary and intellectual minds. In fact, it was the first to engage the attention of international writers and poets who believed in its cause and rushed to the battlefield either as volunteer soldiers or as noncombatant helpers in various capacities.<sup>4</sup> Most of them were on the Republican side — some fighting, some reporting, and some sympathetically watching the developments. The Republican government even organized an International Writer's Conference in Madrid in 1937 to encourage them to travel to Spain and support the Republican cause. Many authors of international prominence responded to the call and made their journey to Spain where they were joined by the German and Italian in exile away from their own country already under the grip of rising fascism.

And so it happened that for the first time on earth, from all countries, from countries nearby and others devil-knows-where, the people came. They came from the hot places and the frozen places, all who were brave or unhappy, and they came marching with their guns.<sup>5</sup>

The literary response to the war in Spain was as immediate and profuse as the physical participation in it. It is true that every war in modern age leaves a great outpouring of literature during its course and in its wake. In ancient times, it was the epic form in which war stories were recounted. Since the eighteenth century, with the growth and development of individualism, democratic freedom, and competitive capitalism, the epic has been replaced by fiction which provides greater scope, variation, and flexibility in form and thematic

treatment. The Civil War in Spain did not produce another national epic like the *Poem of the Cid*, but it did produce volumes of work in fiction, poetry, and personal memoirs. Far from heroic glorification and idealization of war, the Spanish Civil War literature — similar to other modern war literature — explores a great variety of themes such as courage and patriotism, inhuman degradation under physically destructive and psychologically costly effects of war, debasing aspects of militarism, striving for survival, and the collective anti-war spirit.<sup>6</sup> Thus,

Some wars are literary events: they alter consciousness, and so compel literary imaginations to find new forms for describing the ways in which men kill men. These are the wars fought for the noblest causes and the highest-flown abstractions, in which men go into battle believing the rhetoric, and are changed by the violence of reality. The First World War was such a literary event, and in the 'thirties the civil war of Spain was another.<sup>7</sup>

The leading literary apologists for the Spanish Republic, who were directly or indirectly, physically or emotionally exposed to the realities of the wars recorded their truly intense experience, painfully foreseeing the Republican/ Loyalist defeat. Not only did they come to see and understand the political, military, and moral issue involved, but also to realize the sufferings of the innocent people under the devastating civil war. As such, they gave expression to hopes and disillusionments, commitments and betrayals, reflecting a wide range of thoughts and transcending the topical and ephemeral literary commercialism:

The literature of the war in Spain is important because it reflects both the idealism and the subsequent disillusionment of many writers who had envisioned in the struggle of the Spanish people a great cause. No other circumstance is capable of altering the human condition as completely as war. The encounter with violence was to change drastically, not only the attitudes of these writers toward political ideology, but also their philosophy for establishing order in a chaotic world.<sup>8</sup>

This paper briefly examines only three of the best and most important literary representations of the subject and attempts to find some thematic correlation among them as they deal with different phases and developments during the war. These representations are: Malraux's *Man's Hope*, Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, and

Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. All strongly anti-fascists, Malraux, Orwell, and Hemingway demonstrate marked differences in their attitude to and treatment of the Spanish Civil War. Malraux was among the very first to come to the war zone when it was still possible for the defending Loyalist forces to win over the fascist rebels and to hold out hope and idealism. He served the cause of the Spanish Republic as an aviator, organizing his private Loyalist Air Force and showing extraordinary personal courage in his commitment to victory. In *Man's Hope*, he attempts to interpret the war in a historical and philosophical perspective. The novel describes the efforts of the Spanish Republicans to turn their often misdirected but purely idealistic fervor into an efficient and disciplined force. It emphasizes the necessity of concerted, collective and successful action as opposed to the futile glory of Anarchist self-sacrifice; commitment to survival and victory as opposed to the inspired individual heroism for the sake of setting isolated examples of personal courage and revolutionary zeal. While demonstrating the need for effective and united struggle under the Communist command to combat fascism, the novel also portrays, with particular reference to the philosophy of the political Left,

the tragic dialectic between means and ends inherent in all organized political violence — and even when such violence is a necessary and legitimate self-defense of liberty, justice, and human dignity.<sup>9</sup>

The result is the illustration of an excruciatingly complex paradox: the ultimate inhumanity of the strictly enforced party politic as institutionalized by the Left and the hard necessity of coordinating and organizing the forces under a single command- and-control system even if that means a loss of individual freedom and individual ideology, in order to achieve the goal of containing a greater evil.

Of the three, Orwell was the second in time to come to the scene when the internal political and ideological rifts within the Republican ranks were dangerously weakening their defensive strengths. He joined the struggle as a common soldier with a party militia. In *Homage to Catalonia* he pays his tribute to the Socialist utopia born of spontaneous revolutionary planning in a certain part of Spain and records his perception of the suicidal inter-party political rivalries. While not ignoring the Communist potential to resist and fight, he condemns the growing Communist authoritarian power that was responsible for the demise of the short-lived social and political

structure that remained exemplified by itself. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway fictionalizes his understanding of the horrors and absurdity of the war and the havoc it wreaked on tender loves and simple lives. Last of the three to arrive at the scene and working as a journalist, reporting on the events from the Loyalist side, Hemingway's humanitarian concerns have hardly anything to do with the partisan politics and political philosophies of Malraux and Orwell.

The nature of the political commitment of these writers writing under the immediate impact of battlefield experience took various forms. Malraux was a left-winger with an intellectual's thoughts and speculations that transcended party affiliations. Orwell was a liberal socialist of his own kind, advocating the right of the individual to apply his/her conscience and common sense. Orwell's dedication to his personal form of socialism led to his bitter denunciation of the Communist actions. Hemingway's deep humanist impulse prompted him to remain politically uncommitted. Each of them was able to maintain an objective grasp of the war-torn Spain. However, while Malraux and Hemingway made the most use of the relative literary advantages of the novel over the narrative, Orwell had to face the limitation of restricting his account to "the single thread of personal experience". The literary form of the personal memoir, while having an air of greater authenticity about the events described, does not have the wide range and adaptability of the novel. Nonetheless, he, like the other two, succeeded in expressing his sensitive insights through the literary mode of his choice.

Before turning to French nationalist politics under De Gaulle, Malraux fought the rise of European fascism, first as an air force pilot in Spain, then as a speaker in the fundraising campaign for the Spanish Loyalist forces in North America, and finally as a soldier in the Tank Corps of the French Resistance against Hitler. His experiences of active fighting for nearly eight months in Spain gave him the material for *Man's Hope*. Epical in scale and packed with political and military action, the novel provided the scenes for his propaganda film on the early stages of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>10</sup> But it is also a novel in which characterization and description of warfare are combined with many philosophical ideas. There is a high degree of concentration on political philosophy, including a critical consideration of many humanist and universal ideas. The author is concerned with the ethics of individual behaviour vis-a-vis the need

for revolutionary comradeship to put up an effective resistance even at a tragic cost as demonstrated by the major characters in the novel such as Garcia, Magnin, and Manuel. As it is always with Malraux, the leading characters are intellectual revolutionaries who constantly voice their views about their individual political vision, their idea of organized human brotherhood, philosophy of anarchism, and the high price to be paid to meet the challenge of collective political action. They are dedicated anti-fascists, mostly connected with the arts and very articulate in expressing what they think and feel.

According to Goldmann, *Man's Hope* constitutes the highest point of Malraux's attachment to Communist organization and discipline.<sup>11</sup> It is at the same time his last novel before his total break with the Communist movement and eventual turn to Gaulist Nationalist politics. Moreover, while his other novels show him closer to a Trotskyist position, *Man's Hope* shows him closer to the side of the Stalinist perspective.<sup>12</sup> But the novel never drops to the level of propagandistic writing. To the contrary, it takes a broad and comprehensive view of the state of affairs, constantly debating and explaining military, ethical, and moral questions, including many sharp criticisms about the ethics of the Communist stand. Therefore, to argue the novel as primarily concerned with Stalinist perspective and propagandistic intention, is to undermine its great artistic success in the form of complex "revitalized dialogism" and "ironic doubles":

If the novel presents a "Stalinist" thesis, one can only say that it does so reluctantly. It is significant that the most consistent spokesman for the thesis of efficiency, the commander Garcia, is not a Communist (Goldmann refers to him as "le communiste Garcia") and has only a grudging admiration for the Communists. In one of the major discussion scenes, when a Communist bureaucrat tells an anarchist that "concretely, there can be no politics with your ethics," Garcia intervenes: "The complication, and may be the tragedy of the revolution is that there can be none without it either." At the end of the novel, the aviator Magnin, another non-Communist, asks Garcia what he thinks of the Communists. Garcia replies: "My friend Guernico says: 'They have all the virtues of action — and those alone!' But right now, it's action we are dealing with." Garcia is thus presented not a Stalinist ideologue, but as a combatant in a just war who must choose efficiency and effectiveness over generosity or



nobility of heart, even while recognizing the moral superiority of the latter.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the characters imply that the party's real aims might be very different from its stated ones. The anarchist Le Negus expresses his bitter denunciation of the conduct of the Stalinist Communists:

You're soaked in the party, in discipline, in plotting and scheming. If a man does not belong, you don't give him a square deal; you have not a scrap of decency toward him.... Parties are made for men, not men for parties. We don't want to build up a state or a church or an army, just men... No bureaucrats in place of delegates, no armies to put an end to armies, no inequality to end inequality. (201)

Alvear, a retired professor of art history, converses with the fellow art historian Scali on Communist policies in terms of economic liberation and political slavery. He tells the like-minded Scali:

Economic bondage is heavy to bear; but if to destroy it, it is necessary to strengthen political, military or religious bondage, then what does it matter to me? I want a man to be responsible to himself and not to a cause, even if the cause is of the oppressed.

Scali raises the same doubts about the Communist regime, and at the end of the novel, we learn that he has become "almost anti-Communist". In the character of Karlitch, the Russian communist who was attracted by Stalin's armed power, Malraux seems to illustrate the affinity between Stalinist Communism and the Fascism it was combatting. The American journalist Shade makes his telling comment to Golovkin: "You're all too intellectual. And that's the trouble with your country; everybody is brainy, top-heavy with brains. That's why I'm not a communist." And later on he says again, "Let's tell the fascists to get out of here ... and tell the communists the same thing tomorrow, if necessary."

Although Malraux expresses his growing doubt about the consequences of imposed order under the Communist system, the main subject of his novel is revolutionary hope, and to this effect he demonstrates a bias toward the rigorously disciplined communists who are exclusively dedicated to victory in the war. The need of the moment is a well-organized resistance to Franco, which necessity the communists prove to be the most worthy of meeting by turning the loosely scattered loyalist forces into an effective army against the even stronger enemy, and thus give direction to the course of history



and meaning to human existence, countering the absurdity and humiliation of man's fate.

Malraux's *Man's Hope* covers the Spanish conflict mainly from military and philosophical point of view, hardly portraying the politically damaging tendencies within the Republican government. As such, it leaves the political aspects of the war almost entirely unexplored.<sup>14</sup> Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* furnishes exactly what is absent from the Malraux novel. He fought on the quiet Aragon front in northeast Spain, which is one reason why his book describes so little large-scale military combat. Politically, however, he had much to learn from his experience of the static trench warfare at the front where he saw a short-lasting model socialist paradise based on the principles of equality and comradeship. Orwell reaffirms the general accusation against the Communists in terms of specific Communist actions responsible for the demise of that ideal classless community. His months at the front "formed a kind of interregnum in [his] life, quite different from anything that had gone before and perhaps from anything that is to come, and they taught [him] things that [he] could not have learned in any other way."<sup>15</sup>

Landing in Spain in December 1936 under the auspices of the British Marxist ILP (Independent Labour Party)<sup>16</sup> which sent him as a correspondent for its weekly, the *New Leader*, he had started fighting only a few weeks before Malraux stopped. In the first outburst of his zeal, he was unschooled as to the Communist motives and machinations. He was unaware of the mounting tensions between the member parties fighting on the Republican side — the Anarcho-Syndicalist organization known as the CNT and the splinter Marxist party called the POUM, on the one hand, and on the other, the Communist-dominated PSUC.<sup>17</sup> The factions within the Republican coalition government were already struggling for power among themselves. The PSUC sided with the government, and the CNT and the POUM, while also being on the side of the government, became allies against the PSUC. The sad fact is that in Catalonia the real struggling was between the two great Left movements — the PSUC and the CNT. Orwell writes:

Politically conscious people were far more aware of the internecine struggle between Anarchist and Communist than of the fight against Franco (*Homage*, 111).... It was the antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check

or prevent it — ultimately between Anarchists and Communists. (*Homage*, 118.)

Referring to the partisan politics of Loyalist Spain, he writes:

When I came to Spain and for some time afterwards, I was not only uninterested in the political situation but unaware of it. I knew there was a war on but I had no notion what kind of war....I knew that I was serving in something called the POUM (I had only joined the POUM, militia rather than any other because I happened to arrive in Barcelona with ILP papers), but I did not realize that there were serious differences between the political parties. (*Homage*, 46.)

Formed in 1935, the Barcelona-based POUM was the ILP's sister party in Spain. It was a revolutionary left-wing anti-Stalinist group that strongly denounced the Moscow trials. It was closer to, if not identical, with Trotskyism. Considered to be the most doctrinaire of the Spanish Marxist parties, it argued that the workers and not the bourgeoisie must lead the coming revolution. Obviously, the POUM was more complicated than Orwell thought:

It was originally a dissident Communist outfit, but it was also dissident, factional, purist-Socialist, mixed up with dissident Anarchists, with Trotskyists and dissident Trotskyists, with ex-Communists and a agglomeration of non-affiliates, men who sought revolution or adventure or merely a haven at a time when it was dangerous not to belong to some leftist or trade-union political movement. The other parties were all very choosy about members; the POUM was also, paradoxically, the most pedantically Marxist of all the Spanish revolutionary parties.<sup>18</sup>

The CNT-led anarchists wanted to establish a society free from state authority that they believed was 'the most flagrant, most cynical and most complete denial of humanity'.<sup>19</sup> They considered state demands, armies, and property morally evil, and the natural instinct toward freedom, justice and fraternity most important for social change. For them a policy of immediate and violent action was the only method to introduce that utopian era when there would be no organized government, selfishness, hatred and jealousy. According to Salvador de Madariaga, 'Anarchy is centrifugal and denies and defies command. Communism is centripetal and imposes command.'<sup>20</sup> Both the CNT, with its powerful base in Catalonia, and the POUM, with its small size and small influence, disagreed with the Communists in that

they wanted revolution first and then the winning of the war. However,

The fact was that the war — that is, victory in the war — and the revolution were incompatible. The Loyalists were losing the war because of the revolution. The great popular uprisings of the early months — the militias, the volunteers, the seizure and partition of big landholdings, the occupation of factories, the camaraderie, the heroism — all these things had saved the republic. However, by the time Orwell reached Barcelona the vital need was for unity, discipline, and efficiency. Franco was winning, partly because of German and Italian help, but also because the Rebels, as they were called then, had a unified command. The Loyalists were faced with the necessity of organizing a centralized administration and command of losing the war quickly. (*Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, 146.)

Taking instructions from Moscow, the Communists were the best people to accomplish the immediate purpose of winning the war. Republican Spain needed arms and the USSR was the only major power to supply them at the government level, though not as much as the Republic required. The Spanish Communists naturally took this advantage to strengthen their position in the ranks of the Loyalist forces, allowing the Republic to evolve rightward so that it would win the support of the middle class without whom it would not survive. Moreover, by working for radical social revolution they did not want to antagonize the powerful neighbouring democracies, France and Britain, who remained neutral in the conflict, although individuals from these countries volunteered to join in. As one critic put it,

While the Anarchists were quixotically attempting to carry their revolution in the midst of the civil war, the Communists dispensed with liberty and equality in favour of centralism and efficiency — more practical guidelines in getting on with the war. That, after all, was the important issue: without victory, no social revolution could survive, or be put into practice.<sup>21</sup>

In such a complicated political situation attacks and counterattacks, assassinations and counter-assassinations continued unabated. Orwell watched all this with great despair, saying of the infighting within the anti-fascists that

It was one of the most unbearable periods of my whole life. I think few experiences could be more sickening, more disillusioning or,

finally, more nerve-racking than those evil days of street warfare.  
(*Homage*, 130.)

Many of the casualties during that period were due not to the war against France but struggle for power within the structure of the left. The POUM, to whose militia Orwell belonged, became suicidally involved in the fierce internal struggle of this 'civil war within civil war' and was excluded from the Catalan government in December 1936. The Stalinists denounced the party as 'counter-revolutionary' and pro-fascist'.<sup>22</sup> They called for its dissolution and the arrest of its leaders. Their objectives were met during the May-June 1937 uprising in Barcelona when the POUM was crushed by the combined plot of the PSUC, the UGT (which was a major Socialist labour organization) and the government authorities.

Under increasing Communist domination, the zest was going out of the revolution. In a matter of few months Orwell had watched a classless society die. The city of Barcelona had reverted to its pre-revolutionary class distinctions. The Communist policy was such that it let the Capitalist society rise again. The streets were once again full of 'fat prosperous men, elegant women, and sleek cars.... The normal division of society into rich and poor, upper class and lower class, was reasserting itself.' (*Homage*, 110.) Although there were desperate shortages of food and tobacco, the moneyed class could easily afford to purchase anything it wanted to. Expensive hotels and restaurants had reopened; the trains again had first-class coaches and dining cars. There was systematic propaganda against the democratically-run-party militias which were gradually dissolving, and a hierarchically organized Popular Army was established. Thus, Orwell's story is one of betrayal of the spontaneous mass revolution, of the liquidation of the POUM and of the exposure of Communist machinations.<sup>23</sup>

Orwell also found the left-wing extremism of the POUM itself 'a nuisance' and was aware of the faults of the POUM militia. He regarded the revolutionary aspirations of the Anarchist trade unions and the hopelessly underequipped and under-trained POUM militia as rather dangerous idealism. The 'winning of the war' was more important to him than the 'winning of the revolution'. In the circumstances, he had every intention of resigning from the POUM and signing up with the International Brigade, which was then predominantly under Communist control and which was fighting

heroically on the crucial and bloody Madrid front. However, he could not do that because, unfortunately, he was not only wounded but blacklisted by the Communists as one of those to be arrested and executed and consequently he had to flee to save his own life:

Perhaps for having been a victim of the Communist purges in Spain, [Orwell] acquired a more pessimistic view of the Stalinization of the Spanish Civil War. His *Homage to Catalonia* carries an anti-communist invective quite opposed to what may be considered Malraux's theme.<sup>24</sup>

What was most disturbing to Orwell was that the Communists were using shocking methods to suppress the POUM. He was not only sharply critical of what he thought to be the vicious Communist propaganda, but also of the growing Communist authoritarian power. In his essay on Arthur Koestler, Orwell wrote, 'The sin of nearly all left-wingers from 1933 onwards is that they have wanted to be anti-Fascist without being anti-totalitarian.' To the same effect he explains in his Spanish Civil War memoir:

It would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish War from a purely military angle. It was above all things a political war. No event in it, at any rate during the first year, is intelligible unless one has some grasp of the inner-party struggle that was going on behind the government lines. (*Homage*, 46.)

If Malraux goes beyond the military exigencies to incorporate in his vast canvas his divergent views and philosophical preoccupations, Orwell limits his considerations to the inter-party political contradictions. In Spain he learned not only what his Socialism was all about but also the general difference between the Communists and the other elements of the Left. His total participation in the Spanish Civil War gave him an inside view of the motives of the Communists which made him think that while others resisted the tyranny of fascism in the name of freedom and democracy, the Communists fought back in the hope of replacing it by their total supremacy in which they themselves would enjoy total power. Orwell insists that the Communists were working "not to postpone the Spanish revolution till a more suitable time, but to make sure that it never happened." Completely opposite to Malraux's, his story is a story of the betrayal of the social revolution by the Communists. In a book review published shortly after his return from Spain, he notes that



Communism is now a counter-revolutionary force; that Communists everywhere are in alliance with bourgeois reformism and using the whole of their powerful machinery to crush or discredit any party that shows signs of revolutionary tendencies.<sup>25</sup>

Providing excellent insight into the motivations for much of his work, years later Orwell recalled:

The Spanish Civil War and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.<sup>26</sup>

Orwell began as a fundamentalist with a direct, uncomplicated commitment to winning the war and became an intellectual with a readiness to argue issues.<sup>27</sup> He was a close observer of facts only to be an interpreter of them later. He saw the need to distance himself from events happening around him. When the POUM was suppressed, he says,

I did not make any of the correct political reflections. I never do when things are happening.... Afterwards, I can see the significance of events but while they are happening I merely want to be out of them. (*Homage*, 212.)

Still clarifying the author's political view, *Homage* is free from the caustic or sardonic notes that characterize his later works. In Spain he agreed with Arthur Koestler that 'wars, in particular civil wars, consist of only ten percent actions and of ninety percent passive suffering.'<sup>28</sup> Under the most trying conditions in Spain, we get the impression of an Orwell who was agreeable and companionable, very different from the dour figure of other times. Although he saw hatred, envy, greed and all that poisons the human spirit, he still believed in the virtues of sanity and dignity. And that is why he could still play down his despair and disappointment and end on a ray of optimism:

When you have had a glimpse of such a disaster as this —and however it ends the Spanish war will turn out to have been an appalling disaster, quite apart from the slaughter and physical suffering — the result is not necessarily disillusionment and cynicism. Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings. (*Homage*, 230.)



Later on, this optimistic conclusion of his book did not stand the test of time. He continued to be exposed to the terrible international events that extinguished his already thinning and flickering optimism and led to the Orwell of *Animal Farm* and 1984.

Just like Malraux whose novel records the peak of his involvement with the Stalinist Communists and also the beginning of his serious disillusionment with them, Orwell's experiences in Spain helped his socialist sympathies develop into a definite political commitment and also planted the seeds of his strongest doubts that led to his bitter personal disappointment. Comparing his autobiographical prose memoir with the novels of Hemingway and Malraux, one critic writes:

If we say that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is almost pure fiction derived from a modest personal involvement and *Man's Hope* represents both a greater personal engagement and a diminution of fictional element, then Orwell's book is at the opposite pole from Hemingway's since the author is completely involved and the work is nonfiction. *Homage to Catalonia* is the product of a commitment so deep that the disciplinary struggle within the Republican ranks was pure anguish for its author and even reached a point where he had to flee for his life. Orwell ends on a note of despair while Malraux finds reason to hope; but *Man's Hope* appeared in the first year of the struggle while the Republic still seemed to have a chance for survival and before the purges had yet reached their highest pitch of violence.<sup>29</sup>

Hemingway covered the Spanish Civil War for the *North Atlantic Newspaper Alliance*. From the fall of 1937 until early 1938 he stayed in Spain reporting for NANA. While as a journalist he tried to be neutral, he ultimately could not conceal his Loyalist/Republican sympathies, raising money to provide medical supplies to the Loyalists and trying to get the American government extend its support for the Loyalist cause by working on two documentary films, *Spain in Flames* and *The Spanish Earth*, for both of which he wrote the accompanying commentary. The first is raw Loyalist propaganda, the second having a certain degree of artistic merit. Stating the basic theme of the latter, he said:

We gained the right to cultivate our land by democratic elections. Now the military cliques and absentee landlords attack to take our

land from us again. But we fight for the right to irrigate and cultivate this *Spanish earth* the nobles kept idle for their own amusement.<sup>30</sup>

'Perhaps the most memorable image of the entire film', Writes Gene Phillips, 'is that of the peasants stoically hoeing their beloved *Spanish earth* while the threatening rumble of guns thundering in the distance grows gradually louder, signaling that the war which threatens to destroy their land is moving steadily closer.'<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the documentary, like Malraux's fiction film on the same subject, ends on a note of hope, as suggested by the image of water flooding through the irrigation ditches dug by farmers and refreshing the dried up soil. Hemingway continued to promote the cause of Republican Spain by delivering one of his rare political speeches at the second Congress of American Writers in Carnegie Hall, New York City, in 1937. In his address he said:

There is only one form of government that cannot produce good writers and that system is fascism. Fascism is a lie told by bullies. A writer who will not lie cannot live or work under fascism.<sup>32</sup>

Despite all this, quite unlike Malraux and Orwell, Hemingway refused to take sides, remaining basically nonpartisan and going by the dictates of his own conscience. Never a committed political writer in the way the other two were, he leaned towards the Republicans not because he believed in one political party over another but he believed in freedom of thought and expression. In a letter to Carlos Baker in 1951 he reflected on his stand:

There were at least five parties in the Spanish Civil war on the Republican side. I tried to understand and evaluate all five (very difficult) and belonged to none.... I had no party but a deep interest in and love for the Republic.... In Spain I had, and have, many friends on the other side.<sup>33</sup>

Hemingway knew that the Communists had been the leaders in organizing the international brigades and that they were increasingly taking over the planning and direction of the Republican war effort. This awareness of the Communist domination, however, made no difference in his antifascist position. He believed that the immediate task was to hold out against the fascists, and in no way did he commit himself to Communism itself. Robert Jordan, the hero of his novel, senses that when the war is over he may find himself at odds with Communism. Aware that both sides have their share of heroism and cruelty, good and evil, Jordan is more antifascist than pro-Loyalist.

When the novel was published in 1940, it did not receive any appreciation from the Communist Left, who attacked it as a betrayal of the Loyalist cause and its author as a “neutral hedonist.”

It is true that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is not a political propaganda tract. As a war correspondent and as a war writer, Hemingway strives to maintain a politically neutral and but strongly antiwar tone. The sentiments of the Russian loyalist Karkov in the novel are his: ‘I’m a journalist. But like all journalists I wish to write literature.’<sup>34</sup> Hemingway clings fast to what is considered to be the writer’s first and foremost duty — to show people as they are, either untainted or blinded by any political ideology. His concern lies with common and fundamental human reactions to the dangers facing humanity in general across the political and military lines. Such a stance enables him to penetrate into the psychological reality of his characters and transcend political one-sidedness. The title he gives to his novel is taken from John Donne’s *Meditation XVII* and shows how he feels about all men, not just those at war on this side or that side.<sup>35</sup>

Generally speaking, Hemingway does not elaborate, intellectually or philosophically. There is a reduction of things to their simplest expressions. However, his hero Jordan experiences great psychological complexity in dealing with his Spanish comrades who are usually characterized as anarchically independent and proud. Besides, he has, too, to overcome the conflicts of his own nature as an educated college teacher who has misgivings about certain ideas and loyalties, including radical politics and matters of the heart. Like Malraux’s politically uncommitted Magnin, Jordan does not have any doctrinaire political commitment. Reflecting on the nature of his own commitment he says:

You’re not a real Marxist and you know it. You believe in liberty, equality and fraternity. You believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Don’t ever kid yourself with too much dialectics. They are for some but not for you. (*For Whom*, 305.)

From the beginning we notice signs of change underway in him. As he first enters the guerrilla camp, he reminds himself as a way of exerting himself to live up to the demands of the war situation: ‘Turn off the thinking now, old timer, old comrade. You’re a bridge blower now. Not a thinker.’ Not much of an active advocate of the cause he believes in, he is a quiet, passive, and introspective individual devoted to an aesthetic appreciation in the manifold manifestations of

the physical world and in the gratification of the physical appetite for food and sex. He would like to be one concerned with moral issues, pondering over whether the cause of war is worth the lives of the individuals who die for it, or whether he should have killed Pablo who has 'gone bad' and who has turned uncooperative in blowing up the bridge. Many times Jordan is torn by conflicting emotions of love and duty, restraint and aggressiveness, cruelty and tenderheartedness. Initially, he is totally naive about the people he is fighting with, trying to develop a friendly or brotherly relationship with them. But their self-destructive impulses such as personal and racial pride, tribal and primitive appetite, frustrate his hopes for a fraternal bond. He observes that the Spaniard's willful resistance to authority is the main disintegrating factor in his struggle for a better life. On hearing the news of the ruthless butchery committed by Pablo's group, Jordan appears to recognize that it is a time for the irrational and primitive passions to be let loose rather than a time to seek justice. Ultimately he acquiesces to the necessity for cruelty and destruction. Alternately praising and denouncing his Spanish comrades for what is good and what is bad in them, he is torn apart between the two warring impulses with respect to himself and the group of native people he is working with. Referring to his tendency to procrastinating self-divisions, one critic remarks:

In none of Hemingway's novels does the hero talk so much with himself as in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* — an indication enough of his inner conflict and disturbance.<sup>36</sup>

It is not just Jordan who experiences an unending struggle, both internal and external. The fully living secondary characters in the novel, who want to get out of the war alive, do not seek political or moral justification for their being in this protracted combat. Swayed by fatigue, human weakness, and human hopes and desires, they keep deteriorating, not caring much for their low state of alertness. Thus, Piler remembers the 'good old days' while she was in Valencia; Augustin is tired, hungry, and bored. Andres reminisces about his happy days together with his brother during their youth; he realizes that the enemies are simply other men like himself and are victims of a trick of fate. Rafael leaves station to chase some rabbits. They all know that the enemy is far better equipped and that the war is 'an idiocy without bounds,' not at all worth their lives. The reluctance to die for a cause is not confined to the Loyalists only. Berrendo, second

in command of the fascist cavalry, needs to convince his men that the Loyalist guerrillas have been killed and reluctantly has his soldiers cut off the head of the dead guerrillas for 'proof and identification' during a hilltop operation.

The common humanity of those fighting on both sides is one of the themes both in the novel and the film, *The Spanish Earth*, although the latter is propagandastic in intent. The movie shows a great sympathy for the fascist dead when we hear the voice of the script writer: 'We took no statements from the dead [meaning dead German and Italian soldiers]; but all the letters we read were sad.' This episode of reading personal letters of dead enemy soldiers to create a heart-rending scene is also drawn on in the novel. Jordan reads a letter found in the pocket of a fascist cavalryman whom he has just killed only to discover that the dead man came from a little village that he knows well. He can only curse a war that forces him to kill innocent people. Orwell, too strikes a note of sympathy for the suffering of both sides as he humanizes some fascist soldiers who defected to the Loyalist side:

The chief excitement was the arrival of fascist deserters who were brought under guard from the front line. Many of the troops opposite us....were not fascists at all, merely wretched conscripts and were only too anxious to escape. It struck me that they were indistinguishable from ourselves, except that they wore khaki overalls. (*Homage*, 16.)

The dehumanizing aspects of the war and the need to follow orders are in tragic conflict with the humanitarian concern of an individual whose common and objective feelings of brotherhood embrace the whole of suffering humanity.

That the people in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are necessarily distancing themselves from their respective commitments and that they have started petitioning to Heaven for relief are made clear in Joaquin's relapse into religion. The young and innocent Joaquin stops raising Communist slogans and starts saying "Hail Mary's". As Lt. Berrendo rides down the hill in one direction, he says a prayer for Julian who was his best friend and who has just been killed by El Sordo. As Anselmo walks down the hill in another direction, he too prays for the departed souls of El Sordo and his compatriots trapped on a mountain-top by a fascist cavalry patrol and killed by an air attack. Jordan's and Anselmo's views on killing are prompted by not



only their liberal, humanitarian feelings but also their religious beliefs and sentiments. Thus, Hemingway's characters at certain stages of their development return to religion, which those of Malraux's never do. Instead, the characters in *Man's Hope* find their religious satisfaction in their absolute commitment to victory and to the line of duty determined by party policies. Unlike the leftist Malraux, Hemingway continued to believe, at least nominally, in Roman Catholicism, despite the fact that the Spanish Catholic Church was supporting Franco. He did so simply because he believed that the issues involved in the Spanish Civil War were political and not religious.

Questions have been raised as to how far the Hemingway novel is successful in giving us a true picture of the Spanish people at war. He had already displayed his ability to describe the military actions and the feelings of men at war in *A Farewell to Arms*, a highly successful anti-war novel. So is *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, with its stress on the severe strains and tensions caused by war: fear, bitterness, weariness, emotional disintegration, cowardice, suspicion, betrayal, and disunity. The Spanish novelist Arturo Barea, who took part in the civil war on the Loyalist side, maintains that Hemingway's novel fails to present a satisfactory of the historical Spanish Civil War and that the author only gives his special version of it.<sup>37</sup> Barea also thinks that the heterogeneous grouping together of the provincial Castille peasants, Pablo and Pilar, is not convincing and that the love story of Jordan and Maria is implausible. One can, however, defend Hemingway by saying that he

had to sacrifice a minor point of psychological propriety in order to gain the more important objective of national scope. The microcosm of the guerrilla band is intended to represent the macrocosm of the whole Spanish people.<sup>38</sup>

The same critic also thinks that the novel is "finally successful in presenting Spain and her people in war primarily because its author maintains exactly the right proportion between emotional involvement and detached objectivity." According to Robert Stephens, Arturo Barea — so ideally situated to evaluate Hemingway's work — may be correct in noting that the novel falls well short of the actual situation at the time of the Spanish War, but he does not see that Hemingway did not attempt to depict a historical reality or to present a reportorial account of the Spanish civil



conflict.<sup>39</sup> While he has none of Malraux's intellectual and analytical consciousness about historical dialectics, Hemingway is concerned with the primitive and mythical aspects of human character. He appears to show that a tendency to anarchistic rebellion and arrogant individualism on the part of the Spaniards had predetermined the tragic consequences of the war. Pablo, Pilar, Anselmo, and Augustin, all display extremist tendencies typical of the Spaniards in general. As he delves deep into the darker motivations of his comrades' behaviour, Jordan is trying to make an articulate expression of the strange and unsettling emotional paradox that constitutes the essential character of a Spaniard:

What a people they have been. What sons of bitches from Cortez, Pizzaro, Menendez de Avila, all down through Enrique Lister to Pablo. And what wonderful people. There is no finer and no worse people in the world. No kinder and no crueller. (*For Whom*, 354.)

Hemingway himself said of the novel, "It was everything I had learned about Spain for eighteen years."<sup>40</sup>

Finally *For Whom the Bell Tolls* gives us a tragically equivocal interpretation of the Spanish Civil War. On the one hand, it provides a kind of positive statement on human life through Jordan's great efforts for the cause he believes to be worth fighting for and through his human qualities such as his love for the sweet Maria and his friendship with the tender-minded Anselmo. On the other hand, there is an underlying sense of destruction and degeneration. Jordan's affiliation with the Loyalists is no simple partisan allegiance; there are ironic contradictions in his position. The tragic death of those who are selfish, egotistical, treacherous and cowardly, sets the theme of human sacrifice in a highly critical perspective. The dark pessimism of Hemingway's earlier works is relieved in this novel by a kind of existentialist proposition that although human enterprise may sometimes end in failure, each of us must do his best for a good cause. El Sordo continues to live and fight though he knows that the future holds no hope. Jordan knows that the job he has been assigned will fail, but he must carry out his fateful attack, trying to blow up the bridge. He must die a death that will serve no useful purpose for the Republican cause. But he has come to see the wisdom of such a sacrifice, finding his own reasons for it — the principle of fortitude and the protection of others. The manner of his dying convinces us that life is worth living and that there are causes worth dying for.

Unlike Malraux's *Man's Hope* which emphasizes the loss of whatever is merely private and individual in the collectivity of the human race and the inexorability of the directions in history, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* ends with a great stress on private emotions and individual concerns out of which one can find good reasons to believe well and die well.

Hemingway came upon the scene when the Spanish Civil War had run half its course and when one could have known that the Loyalists were going to lose. He symbolizes the futility of the Loyalist cause in Al, an American Communist volunteer in the story "Night Before Battle." Like Jordan, Al is about to die uselessly in a poorly conceived foredoomed attack. The same sense of futility is also shown in Maxwell Anderson's Spanish Civil War verse drama, *Key Largo*.<sup>41</sup> Anderson's view is fairly similar to that of Hemingway's whose supposedly neutral journalism and politically noncommittal stance enabled him to take a humanist view of the war. Neither Malraux's philosophical view of historical perspectives nor Orwell's political insights into the inter-party conflicts did excite him; his were purely human reactions to sheer human plight and mortal risks during the war which only caused danger, discomfort and boredom. If Malraux's interest lies in the collective entity of man and Orwell's in the "libertarian-democrat-socialist", Hemingway's lie in the collective anti-war spirit of people and in the significance of the individual tragedy.

## NOTES

1. I was encouraged to watch the continued interest in this most exhaustively analyzed subject. Most recently, Shirley Mangini published *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (Yale University Press, 1995). Peter Carroll published *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford University Press, 1994). Loris Mirella published "Realighning Modernism: Eliot, Auden, and the Spanish Civil War," [*MOdern Language Studies* XXIV:3 (1994) 93-1081]. David Leavitt's novel *While England Sleeps* (New York: Viking Press, 1993) and Laurie Lee's book of nonfiction, *A Moment of War: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1993) are among the recent publications on the subject. Boston College (Massachusetts) organized a symposium on the subject in the fall of

1990 on the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Hemingway novel in question here. Early in 1989 was published Herschel Chipp's *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings* (University of California Press), a book entirely devoted to one of the world's most famous history paintings on the Spanish Civil War. James Shaw published a bibliographical essay, "The Spanish Civil War: Fifty Years Later," in *Choice* 23 (1986): 1005-1008. Curiously, it was the same year (1986) when I had first developed my interest in the subject.

2. Frederick R. Benson, *Writers in Arms: The Literary Impact of the Spanish Civil War* (New York University Press and University of London Press, 1967), xix.

3. Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Cause: The Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1968), 285.

4. W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Christopher Caudwell, John Cornford, Julian Bell, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Graham Greene from England, André Malraux, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Francois Mauriac, Jacques Maritain, Antoine de Saini-Exupery, and Georges Bernanos from France, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Archibald Macleish, Martha Gellhorn, Irwin Shaw, and Maxwell Anderson from the United States, Iliya Ehrenburg from Russia, Thomas Mann, Berthold Brecht, and Gustav Regler from Germany, and Pablo Neruda from Chile are among those who contributed to the literature of the Spanish Civil War. Among the Spanish writers there were Federico Garcia Lorca, Max Aub, themselves with the Republican cause who made their contribution to the literary output of the war.

5. These are the words of Puig in *Man's Hope* (New York: Grove Press, 1979) 180. All quotations from the novel are taken from this translation.

6. See C.O. Ogunyemi, "The Poetics of the War Novel," *Comparative Literature Studies* 20 (1983): 203.

7. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (Princeton University Press, 1982) 242.

8. Benson, *Writers in Arms*, xxix.

9. Joseph Frank, "Andre Malraux: The Image of Man," *Malraux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R.W.B. Lewis (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 73.

10. Malraux's splendid motion picture, *Sierra de Teruel*, based on the novel, was made in Barcelona in 1938, a year after the publication of the novel.

11. See Nicholas Hewitt, "Authoritarianism and Esthetics: The Paradox of *L'Espoir*," *Witnessing Andre Malraux*, ed. Brian Thompson and Carl Viggiani, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press) 114.

12. Robert Sayre, "*L'Espoir* and Stalinism," *Witnessing Andre Malraux*, ed. Brian Thompson and Carl Viggiani (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), p. 125.

13. Susan Rubin Suleman, "The Model Relativized: Malraux's *L'Espoir*," *Authoritarian Fictions* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

14. Nicholas Hewitt comments on how *Man's Hope* sidetracks, even dismisses the notion of a popular revolution in favour of a highly controlled and mechanized war by a disciplined army in "Authoritarianism and Esthetics: The Paradox of *L'Espoir*," *Witnessing Andre Malraux*, ed. Brian Thompson and Carl Viggiani (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press), p. 113.

15. *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952).

16. At first Orwell sought to come to Spain with the credentials of the British Communist Party. Since it already blacklisted those whom he was likely to join there, it declined his overture. He then turned to ILP which was ideologically more militantly Marxist and more willing to cooperate with the Communists than with the Labour Party with which it had broken.

17. He came to know about the complex hostilities within the several anti-fascist organizations only after the fall of Malaga:

It was the first talk I heard of treachery or divided aims. It set up in my mind the first vague doubt about this war in which, hitherto, the rights and wrongs had seemed to beautifully simple. (*Homage*, 45)

18. *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London and Boston, 1975), p. 145.

19. Quoted from Michael Bakunin, the founder of European anarchism, in Benson, *Writers in Arms*, op. cit., p.3.

20. *Ibid.*, 9.

21. Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Cause: The Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 106.

22. Ralph Bates, who just returned from service in Spain, declared that not only was the war effort

retarded by the political problem of Barcelona [but] three days before the Twelfth International Brigade, under Lukacz, attacked Huesca in an attempt to help Bilbao, the POUM troops were playing football with the fascists in no man's land. (Quoted in Weintraub, p. 107.)

23. Despite all these suppressions, the Communist military tactics, which were probably right during the war, commanded a great sympathy even among those who were critical of the Communists. Ralph Bates, who broke away with Stalinism after the Russian invasion of Finland, wrote:

Lest I be thought to be unfairly critical of the Spanish Communist Party, let me say that that party throughout the civil war exercised marvellous patience, showed great wisdom, demonstrated its magnificent courage and worked with an exhausting intensity in the service of the Spanish cause. The Communists of the world, in their degrees did the same. The tragedy in Spain was that the effective fighting forces were more or less limited to the Communist regiments. The theological bitterness of the Communist Party, however, could be seen in its attitude toward the POUM party. That party's policies would have been disastrous had they been put into effect. That indisputable truth was made the basis for the utterly unscrupulous charge that the POUM was in actual contact with Franco, and was working exclusively and consciously in the interests of the fascists. (Weintraub, 329)

24. James Greenlee, *Malraux's Heroes and History* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975), p. 104.

25. Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London, 1968), Vol. I, p. 270.

26. Ibid., p. 5.

27. Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Orwell: The Transformation* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980), p. 251.

28. See the Foreword to Koestler's *Dialogue with Death* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1942).

29. Charles D. Blend, *Andre Malraux: Tragic Humanist* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963), p. 34.

30. Quoted in Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1969).

31. *Hemingway and film* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), p. 36.

32. Hemingway, "The Writer and the War," *The Writer in a Changing World*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: 1937), p. 69.

33. Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer As Artist* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 228. Here it may be mentioned that Hemingway the man was not as uncommitted to the Loyalist cause as Hemingway the novelist seems to be. There is a certain political distancing in the novel giving

credence to his nonpartisan stance but outside the novel he was probably more committed. He had a fallout with John Dos Passos when the latter equated Communism with Fascism. He may have had trouble choosing among the five Republican parties, but certainly he had no difficulty choosing the Republican side over the Fascist.

34. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1968), p. 244.

35. Donne said: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never ask to know *for whom the bell tolls*; it tolls for thee."

36. Chaman Nahal, *The Narrative Pattern in Ernest Hemingway's Fiction* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), p. 128.

37. Arturo Barea, "Not Spain But Hemingway," *The Literary Reputation of Hemingway in Europe*, ed. Roger Asselineau (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 197.

38. Kenneth Kinnamon, "Hemingway, the Corrida, and Spain," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (Spring 1959): 60.

39. Robert Stephens, "Language Magic and Reality in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*," *Criticism* 14 (Spring 1972): 151.

40. Quoted in Malcolm Cowley, "A Portrait of Mister Papa," *Ernest Hemingway: The man and His Work*, ed. John McCaffrey (Cleveland: 1950), p. 53.

41. In the prologue to the play, King McCloud is trying to take his men back off a hill, for the Loyalist cause is lost and further resistance is hopelessly useless:

Why should we die here for a dead cause, for a symbol, on these empty ramparts where there's nothing to win, even if you should win it?

Refusing to leave with McCloud the men die and McCloud arrives at an understanding of why volunteers die for causes:

in the last analysis one dies because it's a part of the bargain he takes on when he agrees to live. — A man must die for what he believes — if he's unfortunate enough to have to face it in his time — and if he won't then he'll end up believing in nothing at all — and that's death, too. (*Key Largo*, Act II).



## **IMAGINED COMMUNITIES :**

### **The Collectivisation of Dissent in Modern Indian Poetry**

*K. Satchidanandan*

Contemporary literature, even when deeply rooted in the past, cannot but reflect contemporary experience : the experience of a world fast moving away from truth to state-of-the-art merchandise, from the aristocratic respectability of authoritarian families to the polluted sunshine of the shopping malls and the permissiveness of the modern-day beach resorts, a world that holds out the gruesome promise of the end of the ideologies including the visionary ideologies that represented the principle of hope. Liberation movements across the Third World seem to have dried up as commitment to the market system has become sheer 'commonsense' and no longer a political programme. All values other than those of the business society seem to have been abolished and any discussion of the issue of ends, to have become anathema. Multinational capital is busy gearing up for local 'defensive' operations round the world buying up nationalised industries on the cheap and reaping the benefits of the cheap labour being thrown open to it by the collapse of national states and the deterioration of the former Second World into Third World status. The emergence of a new, aggressive, ruthless capitalism has already sounded the knell of autonomous development in South Asia forcing the people to become either avaricious consumers or immiserated labourers for foreign capital. The days of the grand social engineering projects seem to be over; the dreams of a better society are dismissed offhand as flights of fancy or declarations of subversive intent. Alternative ends are invalidated on the strength of the proved ineffectuality of means. A jubilant valorization of the careeristic values of a competitive society appears to be the only ethical possibility. The only voices heard are of the preachers of maxims like 'everyone for himself', the free-for-all ideologists. The seduced are happy as they have resources to compete and the rules of the game are positively in their favour. To the oppressed however the rules seem to be working against their very survival. Liberty has boiled down to mere consumer choice : poverty is a positive disqualification in a world that privileges the rich. The market

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interpretation of freedom translates communal needs into acts of individual acquisition. It also abhors autonomy and reduces cultural diversity into a variety of changeable fashions and marketable life-styles that easily become the investments of a flourishing culture industry with its mushrooming pulp-literature factories, multi-cultural cook-books, pop-fairs, ethnic exports, formula films, TV soaps and video-parlours. The struggle to secure communal diversity is hampered by this emphasis on individual diversity. Collective identities go against the market's idea of individually chosen life-styles and manufactured, marchandised personalities. So consumer societies are always hostile to collective identities. They believe in standardisation, uniformity and an obtrusive interference with alternate ways of life and thought, and define difference as deviation, a 'problem' that requires 'solutions'. Or else alternate ways of life may arouse spectator interest : they arouse neither resentment nor fellow-feeling; instead they belong to the outerworld of theatre and spicy spectacle like the tribals dancing on a TV screen in a city hotel. They no more belong to the inner world of the politics of life. Tolerance here degenerates into estrangement instead of leading to solidarity. It reduces social bond into surface gloss. Difference is considered safe as long as it is confined to the airy world of the symbolic game of representation and does not spill over into the realm of daily co-existence, when it is perceived as a threat. The other's inferiority is justified by difference; thus tolerance becomes fully compatible with social domination. The promise of equality is withdrawn as difference means distance, non-cooperation and hierarchy. The global origin of problems, economic, ecological and cultural, is effectively hidden from view as new sensitivities are confined to neutral, de-politicized technological discourse. The political issue of democratic control over technology, their purposes and desirable limits, the questions of self-management and collective choice is always left outside. The rich countries are busy selling their poison as the poor people's food and transferring provenly dangerous technologies and polluting production-units to nations like ours. The remedy of social ills is also privatized. This clash between the social nature of risks and the privatized means of their containment is one of the contradictions of late capitalism. True, the patronage-state has collapsed with its suppression of democratic opposition and individual freedom and its monopoly of needs-satisfaction and social

status. But is the open market with the consumer society the only alternative? Should the obvious failures of the Statist model of socialism lead to a passive submission to the norms of a business society? Don't we require a new mood, a new methodology and an introspective or reflexive dialectic that befits a situation where the relationship between the individual and the system seems fluid, even dissolved? Don't we need fresh visions of radical social transformation, illuminated by the objective experience of the majority of our people and inspired by indigenous ideas and experiments? And a political aesthetic that affirms the primacy of the present, the present of struggle and suffering, and grapples with the seemingly elusive totality of our complex experience free from the ideological reductionism that stifled the artistic movements of the past? Remember that. The totalitarian systems punish the dissenting artist with prison, exile or even death while the market society absorbs and contains him, turns him into a show-piece and thus incapacitates him subverting the very intent of his rebellion. It permits even opposition as long as it is marketable. How do the writers of our countries react to this situation where their identity is either eroded or turned into a purely private, personal, saleable commodity?

Let me take the case of Indian poetry. The early modernists of the 50s and the 60s were basically committed to the freedom of the individual in the background of the development of debilitating post-industrial urban infernos with their massification of human beings. I will not say that the modernist problematique is absolute; there are and will be contexts where the private has to be upheld and defended against the encroachment of the public and the omnipresent gaze of the modern state that turns individuals into subjects without will, passive participants of the hegemonic designs. The dark days of the mid-seventies belong as much to the reality of the immediate past as to the possibility of the immediate future. Still, the modern state is different from the authoritarian regimes of the left and the right varieties precisely in that it privatises and diffuses dissent rather than collectivising it and prompting it to accumulate into an explosive energy that shatters the system. This compels writers to evolve counter-strategies for the collectivization of dissent. Literary modernism in its Indian form had meant an articulation of the angst and alienation, the divided self, of the Indian caught between the

gilded image of his pre-colonial past and his squalid present that roamed the crowded thoroughfares of post-industrial metropolis. At the ontological level, it meant a search for the lost identity of the individual : a quest that often bordered on the metaphysical. B. S. Mardhekar, Dilip Chitre, G. M. Muktibodh, Sitanshu Yashaschandra, Gopalkrishna Adiga, Kaa. Naa. Subramanian, N. N. Kakkad, Ayappa Paniker, Navakanta Barua, Sitakant Mahapatra and other pioneers of modernism in Indian poetry — along with their counterparts in other South Asian countries like Wimal Dissanayake or Mahagama Sekara of Sri Lanka, or Mohan Koirala and Gopalprasad Rimal of Nepal— responded to the modern environment in this way. Their responses are not without social dimensions, but their central concern seems to have been the destiny of the individual in modern mass-society rather than that of communities caught in the maelstrom of exploitative modernisation. However, roughly from the 70s onwards Indian poetry begins to concern itself with collective destinies. A glance at the present poetic landscape in India reveals four radical concerns whose boundaries often cross one another.

The most dominant of these streams may be termed progressive-modernist. The attitudes of the poets embraced by the term are by no means uniform. At one end of the spectrum stand, the votaries of armed peasant struggles, like the Naxalite poets of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh whose action-poetry combines a virile modern idiom with a sincere moral indignation. At the other end stand the followers of Gandhi and Lohia and liberal humanists whose frustration with the system is as intense as that of the Naxalites; only they hold on to indigenous ideals of peaceful social transformation. What unites these writers is their recognition of the existence of class inequalities; this however is combined in the best representatives of the trend with a deeper awareness of the complexity of human experience and an introspective search for their own selves in relation to the world of outer reality. These tendencies along with their subtler and newer sense of form and idiom rescue these poets from the slogan-mongering and rhetorical mode of some of the early progressives. (Late) Raghubir Sahay, (Late) Sreekant Verma, Kunwar Narain, Kedarnath Singh, Prayag Shukla, Asad Zaidi, Rituraj, Mangallesh Dabral, Pash, U. R. Ananthamurthy, P. Lankesh, Chandrasekhara Patil, H. S. Shivaprakash, Nida Fazli, Balraj Komal, Udayan Thakkar, Vinda Karandikar and K. G. Shankarapillai may

broadly be said to belong to this genre. Some of these poets, like Chandrasekhara Kambar and Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan have moulded a modern folk idiom to present the life of the rural folk and the marginalised sections of the society. The secular progressive-modernist trend may safely be said to dominate South Asian poetry is general today, championed as it is by outstanding young poets like Parakrama Kodituwakku of Sri Lanka or Bhupi Sherchan and Sailendra Sakar of Nepal.

The insurrectionary poetry of the Dalit Movement in Maharashtra and Gujarat and the Bandaya Movement in Karnataka that articulates the silent pain and anger of the 'untouchables' relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy for more than thirty centuries constitutes another attempt at forging a collective identity and popular solidarity. To them the socio-cultural phenomenon of the caste is more real than class, a purely economic category. (This of course leaves scope for theoretical debate as caste too may be considered a form of social class a la Nicos Poulantzas.) There is indeed a diversity of attitudes even among the Dalit poets that springs chiefly from their ambivalent relationships with the Buddha, Marx or Ambedkar. Some deify Ambedkar while some others want to go beyond him. Narayan Surve, Ramdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Vaman Nimbalkar, Arun Kamble, J. V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Yashwant Manohar, A. K. Rathod, Prakash Jadhav, and Keshav Meshram of Marathi, Joseph Macwan and Pravin Gadhvi of Gujarati and Siddhalingaiah of Kannada are some of the spokesmen of this poetic movement. Dalit literature has also created its own alternative aesthetics that rejects the norms set by classical Brahminic poetics and throws overboard classical values like propriety, balance, restraint and understatement. The diction of these poets is often deliberately subversive as it challenges the middleclass notions of linguistic decency. Dalit women poets like Mallika Amaresh have given a feminist slant to Dalit poetry in their attempt to articulate their double oppression.

This takes us straight to the third form of collective poetic dissent : that of India's women poets. India has always had great women poets from Ouvayar and Meera to Balamani Amma and Mahadevi Varma. It is not impossible to deconstruct their work from a feminist perspective as has been done in the case of Meera, whose rejection of her royal husband is construed as a revolt against patriarchal power. However, a committed feminist poetry that consciously strives to



subvert the phallogocentric order of things by salvaging a buried 'mother-tongue' that exults in counter-metaphors and revisionist myth-making and establishing an alternative semiotics centred round the pre-Oedipal phase is a recent development. The first signs of such a development had already appeared in the poems of Amrita Pritam, Nirmal Prabha Bardoloi, Padma Sachdev, Sugatha Kumari, Gouri Deshpande, Nabaneeta DebSen, Ramala Das and Pratibha Satpathy. They are no more stray voices now; there is a whole new sisterhood of dissenting women poets that includes among others Mallika Sengupta, Anuradha Mahapatra, Kabita Sinha, Manjit Tiwana, Lalitha Naik, S. Usha, Popati Hiranandani, Kondepudy Nirmala, Panna Naik, Meena Alexander, Eunice D'Souza, Sujata Bhatt, Archana Varma, C. S. Lakshmi, Indira Bhavani, Cantira Kanti, Savithri Rajeevan and Vijayalakshmi. Together they seek a libidinal economy and a new politics of Desire that can restructure the male-dominated world on the basis of the female principle that represents nature, instinct and love. This is where their struggle joins hands with the ongoing struggle on the ecological front against the arrogant and unthinking devastation of the biosphere.

Equally significant is the search for regional and linguistic identity in recent Indian poetry. This is to be seen as a natural continuation and fulfilment of the process of cultural decolonisation that had accompanied India's struggle for political independence. It is also a reaction against the standardisation of culture, the bulldozing of diversity, being sought by the hegemonic forces of the market and by revivalist communalism as also against the general decline of the federal ideal in the national life. The battle is not between the ideals of integration and disintegration but between two different concepts of unity : one that believes in an insipid uniformity imposed from above, a forced cultural compound, a superficial tinsel collage and the other that places its faith in a genuine fraternity of our diverse cultures each permitted to retain and encouraged to develop to the full its own distinct mode of popular creativity. This centripetal tendency expresses itself in various forms. In the Southern languages it appears primarily as a quest for a Dravidian poetics implied, say, in the works of the Tamil Sangam poets and the Kannada Vachanakaras. The post-Bharati period in Tamil poetry, as represented by poets like Bharathidasan and Na. Pichmurthy, has shaped a regional consciousness distinct from the earlier pan-Indian matriotism. The



Kannada poetry after Adiga has demonstrated the gap between the rich cultural memory of the Soodras and the outcastes and their present political experience of marginalisation as is evident in the poetry of Lankesh, Chandra Sekhara Kambar, Chandrasekhar Patil or Siddhalingaiah. In Malayalam this regionalism appears chiefly as a celebration of local myths — especially counter-myths like that of Onam that worships Mahabali, the demon King and indirectly denounces Vamana, the impish incarnation of God Vishnu — an attempt to discover a tradition distinct from the pan-Indian one and a struggle for the de-Sanskritisation of Malayalam language as represented by M. Govindam, N. N. Kakkad (in his later phase) and Attoor Revivarma (in his recent poems). Traditional metres, familiar rhythms, provincial archetypes, regional rituals and cultural symbols and local flora and fauna are staging a comeback constructing an eco-aesthetics of racial retrospection and introspection. The urbanisation and standardisation of Hindi have also not gone unchallenged. There are writers who remain stubbornly regional and refuse to make concessions for readers outside their dialect zones. The oral and written traditions of dialects like Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Chattisgarhi, Bundelkhandi, Brajabhasha and Haryanvi now overshadowed by sophisticated urban Hindi are not unlikely to inspire regional poets as they have already inspired fiction writers like Sanjeev, Malchand, Shivamurthi, Swayamprakash and Krishna Sobti. The Dalit poets like Dhasal and the Naxalite poets like Gaddar have also drawn freely on rural dialects and tribal languages, thus extending the boundaries of their languages beyond the standard idiom of the metropolitan middleclass. The battle for the retrieval of Urdu and the reassertion of Maratha identity advocated by writers like Bhalchandra Nemade are again symptoms of a revitalisation of the regional roots of Indian literature.

Similar trends, I may safely presume, exist also in the other literatures of South Asia. The common roots of South Asian literature lie as much in our shared geo-political, and socio-economic situation and our common historical experiences of invasion, colonisation and struggles of resistance as in our collective heritage of myths and archetypes, folklore and ritual, the melodies of our songs and the rhythms of our dance, and our shared ways of perceiving outer and inner experience. Our literatures seem to be passing through a turbulent and creative phase of retrospection and introspection and a

vigorous re- assertion of our rich cultural diversity. In this perhaps lies the key to our spiritual fraternity.

## **Medieval Indian Romance: A Case of migration or polygenesis?**

*Tapati Mukherjee*

The Indian spirit considers attainment of divine ecstasy as the supreme object of human life. The pleasure of literary experience has been rated by Indian aestheticians as equivalent to the bliss of contact with the 'Supreme Spirit' (brahmasvadasahodara). To present the idea in a fathomable form various tales were told in the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas*, such as of Puraravas and Urvashi, of Lopamudra and Agastya etc. Charming romantic stories were also found in abundance in ancient literature like those of Savitri-Satyaban, Sakuntala-Dusyanta, Nala-Damayanti. Beast fables where human qualities had been imposed on animals and other inanimate objects, were used for a definite didactic purpose and fables became instruments of inculcating useful knowledge. Romantic tales which were hardly edifying, dealt more with imaginary romantic adventures and finally the period of great romances, represented by Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita*, Subandhu's *Vasavadatta* and Bana's *Kadambari* set examples of the Indian romance.

Side by side, another literary wave, preserved in Perso-Arabic tradition swept India after the advent of the Muslim power in India. The Perso-Arabic component of Indian literature is not to be identified always with Islam, though it is misconceived to be so by the average literate people in India. The romantic love stories of pre-Muslim Arab world such as the story of Laila and Majnun and adventures stories like those of Hatim-al-Tayy, which had nothing to do with Islam, penetrated into Indian literature.

Notwithstanding the fact that both Sanskrit and Persian literatures have in their own way exercised influences on medieval literatures, each of them possessed a few distinctive traits, peculiarly its own. Sanskrit romance was essentially sophisticated, conventional and above all courtly in the truest sense of the term. It invariably culminated in happy union, though tragic elements were not lacking either. Sorrows and sufferings, trials and tribulations appeared in due course of the narrative but finally they paved the way to a happy ending. Marked by absence of death or tragedy in the literal

connotation, Sanskrit literature often demonstrated that there could be more unfathomable tragedy than death. Here love was a product both of personal wooing and social solicitation. The concept of rebirth, magic and supernatural elements played a predominant role in the development of Sanskrit romance. In its literary aspects, Sanskrit romance excelled in descriptive exuberance of love and eroticity. These characteristic features of Sanskrit romance can be illustrated with the help of 'Avanti-sundariparinaya', a chapter of *Dasakumaracarita* by Dandin. The story depicts the courtly love of prince Rajavahana and Avantisundari, the daughter of Manasara, a local king. In a traditional fashion befitting Sanskrit concept of romance, they met in a garden where the young princess came with her girl friends to worship Madana, the God of love, on a spring morning. The concept of worship of Madana was a favourite device, used elaborately by Sanskrit writers to demonstrate love pangs of the adolescent heroine. Sanskrit romances excel in the description of all the conceivable points of the beau-ideals of female grace according to Indian concept. A single quote from 'Avanti-sundariparinaya' will amply illustrate our point

“ya vasantasahayena samutsukaya rateh kelisalabhanjikavidhishaya kancana narivisesam viracayya atmanah kridakamara - sararavinda-saundaryena padadvayam udyana-vana-dirghika- matta-maralika-gamanaritya lilalasagativilasam, tunirala- vanyena janghe, lilamandira-dwara-kadalilalityena manojna- murujugalam, jaitrarathacaturyena ghanam jaghanam ... raraje”

(She, Avantisundari, who stayed as if made to order by the friend of spring [Kamadeva] a female figure of exquisite beauty out of his anxiety to prepare for his consort Rati a play-doll, investing her feet with the softness of the best lotuses in his own sporting tank, making her dallying slow steps in invitation of those of the sporting ducks in the tank of his own garden, making her thighs as symmetrical as his quiver, her legs beautiful with the symmetry of banana plants, at the gates of his dallying chamber ... etc.) The concept of rebirth was introduced at this juncture as Rajavahana recounted the story of their previous birth, thereby establishing the identity of himself as Samba and Avantisundari as his wife Yajnavati. The pangs of separation, experienced by the lovelorn pair, were described to forceful language.

“virahanalasantaptahrdayasparensa nunamusnikrtah svalpibhavati malayanilah. navapallavakalpita talpamidamanangaganisikhapatalamiva santapam tanostapoti.”

(Verily, the South wind gets sparse, heated by contact with hearts burning with the fire of nonunion. This bed, made of tender leaves is adding to the burning sensation of my body like so many flames of love fire.) But suffering could not stand for long in Sanskrit romance and as a remedial measure, the magician episode was introduced to bring about the happy union under the fold of magic wedding.

On the other hand, its Persian counterpart was no doubt courtly, but at the same time was appropriated to a greater extent by the people below and as such was nearer to soil. It is essentially a tragedy, ending in death. Differences between social positions are responsible for the dissonant love. Persian romances vibrated with intense emotional feelings and overwhelmed the reader by blending skilfully pathos and love, fury and tears.

If we take the legendary love story of *Laila-Majnun* composed by Nizami, who was the first to make use of all the traditional versions, widely dispersed and greatly varied in detail, which he shaped into a great narrative poem<sup>1</sup>, as a representative of medieval Persian romance, we will come across more intensity of emotion, as compared to its Sanskrit counterpart. The hero Qays himself was renamed as Majnun (love sick.) Notwithstanding the divergences in different versions<sup>2</sup>, the fact remains that in most of them the hero Qays and heroine Laila belong to different social strata - the hero Majnun being a prince and Laila the daughter of the chief of a warrior tribe. As an inevitable consequence their love incurred social wrath which led to their painful separation and ultimate death. In sharp contrast with the cool and calculating Sanskritic hero, the Persian romantic hero is poetic in nature and at the same time contemplative. Nizami understands the three elements of the traditional Majnun — his love, his insanity and his poetical genius, as three aspects of one indivisible unity. Insanity and poetical frenzy are two expressions of the same state of mind, of a soul estranged in the world of men. Love-lorn Majnun lost his eyes when he embraced a thorny tree, taking it for his beloved and singing “Peace of my soul, where are you? Why do you rob me of my life? Other than my love, what is the sin of my heart, this heart which asks for your forgiveness?”



Compared to the bashful Sanskrit heroine, the Persian romantic heroine appears to be more realistic and dashing, which is amply illustrated when in the open assembly she declared in defiance of her father that she married Majnun and even under severest torture she murmured the name of her beloved (a faint resemblance with the heroine Vasantasena of *Mrcchakatika* can be traced here.) The tragic effect was complete when in search of each other they embraced death. A glance at these two types of romances will make it clear that Sanskrit romance, alienated from life and appearing somewhat tailor-made differs in matter and spirit from the Persian one, marked both by poetic fragrance and stark reality of life.

Unquestionably Sanskrit literature, as a whole has influenced — rather shaped and moulded most of the modern Indo-Aryan languages. The great epics, the Puranas and classical poems, dramas and the colourful romances paved the way for a good many creative writers and authors of regional literatures in the medieval as well as the modern period. On the other hand, the contribution of the Perso-Arabic component has not at all been negligible. It should also be noted in this context that Perso-Arabic elements were never treated as the sole treasure of the Muslims only, on the other hand it was practised by many non-Muslims as well and besides Urdu, a good many regional literatures were influenced by Persian, from the beginning of the Mughal rule and that tradition still continues.

On the perspective of Perso-Sanskritic background, regional literatures, flourishing in different parts of medieval India, have various types of romances in their store. A few of them are indeed significant by their remarkable affinity in theme and treatment, appearing often as a legacy of their predecessors — either Sanskritic or Perso-Arabic. We may take here a Bengali romantic ballad *Mahua*, composed by Dwija Kanai and belonging to the *Maimansimhagitika*, the date of which is believed to have been between 10th and 12th century A.D. and a famous Punjabi romance *Heer-Ranjha* by Barish Shah to illustrate the similarities and in some instances divergences also.

Quite in conformity with the Persian romantic tradition, unconventional love was portrayed in both the stories. In *Mahua*, the heroine is a girl belonging to a wondering tribe and the hero Naderchand, a rich landlord. In the Punjabi story, it is just the reverse — the girl Heer comes from a well-off family and the hero Ranjha,

though originally not nomadic, later develops roaming habits and travels from one place to another. In fact, vagabondism and love were somewhat interrelated in the Punjabi romances. Here the hero is poetic, sensitive and soft. In the conception of principal character of both these romances, Persian impact is quite evident — both Laila and Mahua belonging to a wandering tribe and both Qays and Ranjha, share the same traits of character — poetic and wandering.

Both the heroines in Bengali and Punjabi romances were exquisitely beautiful and their beauty described in almost parallel terms. Both are exquisite in beauty.

“gujjhī rahe na Hira hazār biccoñ”

(Even among thousands of beautiful maidens, Heer cannot be concealed for her beauty.)

“megher saman kes tar tarar sama ankhi”

(Her hair resembles cloud and eyes can be compared with stars only.)

In such descriptive passages, Sanskrit conventions can be traced at least in Bengali.<sup>3</sup>

In both Punjabi and Bengali tales, it was love at first sight. Some sort of refuge were offered to either of the two in both stories. Ranjha was appointed as a shepherd at the insistence of Heer. Mahua and her father were provided with a permanent residence by Naderchand. The concept of love at first sight might have been inherited from either Sanskrit or Persian romances where it was a recognised concept.

“Young Qays was drowned in the Ocean of love before he knew that there was such a thing. And Laila? She fared no better. A fire had been lit in both — and each reflected the other.”

In expressions of love, both heroines of Punjabi and Bengali romances were almost identical.

“mainuñ bāble di kasam rañjhiya oye

marjāuñ je tudh thin mukh modāñ

anniñ hoye ke nayan prāñ jāñon

tere bābā jo kānt māiñ hor loḍā”

(Ranjha, I swear in the name of my father that if I ever turn my face from you, my mother will die. If I ever long for any body else except you as my husband, I will die blind.)

Mahua narrates her feelings to her friend Palanka:

“āge āmi jāibām moirā murtek nā dekhile

candra sūrya sākhyā sai sakkhi hoio tumi

Nadyar Thākur hoilo āmār prāṇer swāmī”

(Even if I miss him for a second, I will die. Let the moon, the sun and you be my witness — Nadya Thakur is my husband.)

Though thematically identical, the situation have been reversed at places in the two romances. Heer wanted to flee away with Ranjha to avoid her marriage with Khera, but Ranjha refused since he intended social marriage with her.

“Hīre iśk nā mūl svād dendā  
nāl ooriyāñ ate udhāliyāñ de”

(Heer, if we play hide and seek then our love will become colourless.)

But in Mahua it is just the opposite — Naderchand wanted to go to a far-off place, but Mahua disagreed.

“Naderchand — Mā chādbām bāp chādbām chādbām gharbādi tomāre laiya kanyā āiyām deśantarī.

Mahua — Āmi mari jale dubyāre bandhu āmār mātā khāo cchaḍan diyā āmār āśā ghare chailyā jāo.”

Naderchand — I will desert my parents, my home and all other belongings, with you only I want to go abroad.

Mahua — I swear, O my dear, that I will die , you please go back home, leaving me alone.)

Another striking similarity between the stories is that in search of their beloved both heroes left home — Ranjha became a mendicant, Naderchand became a vagabond.

“bāidyār nārīr lāigyā thākur baideśī hoilo”

(Nadyar Thakur has become a vagabond for this nomadic girl.)

Persian concept of lovesick hero, roaming about in wretched condition might have some impact here.

As in love, so in despair also, both the pairs shared common features. Ranjha came to the village of Heer in disguise of a monk and under the false pretext of snakebite, they met each other. Naderchand, on the other hand after a tedious journey met Mahua in disguise. He was given shelter by Mahua’s foster father Humrah, as ever-depressed Mahua was looking happy.

In the conception of villain, affinity between Persian and Bengali romances is striking. In *Laila-Majnun* king Naofal who married Laila through deception was depicted as a villain, whereas in *Mahua*, the saint aspiring for Mahua, though unsuccessful bore resemblance to the Persian villain.<sup>4</sup>

In *Laila-Majnun*, Persian King Naofal married Laila, but before he got hold of her, was killed. This idea, in somewhat identical form came down in the Punjabi romantic story where Heer's husband Khera never dared to approach Heer as whenever he attempted to do so, he was thrown away by 'Panjapir' divine element. Supernatural element was introduced again when Ranjha, having been deprived of Heer cried out in despair and there was all on a sudden fire all over the city. Sanskrit impact might have worked as a decisive factor in this case.

Following as if the foot steps of their Persian predecessor both Bengali and Punjabi romances and with a tragic note which is uncommon in a Sanskrit romance. Both the couple fled away to avoid fury of their guardians, and when captured, they embraced death. The treatment differed in that Heer was killed by her father himself and this very move left Ranjha dead. Mahua committed suicide when asked by her father to murder Naderchand who was ultimately killed by the nomads.

It should also be noted in this context that inspite of allegiance to the Sanskrit or Perso-Arabic conventions, local colour is also not lacking in any of the two. Tenderness, a general trait of Bengali character, was nicely manifested in the conversation between Naderchand and his mother before the former's journey in quest of Mahua. On the other hand, valour and virility, deemed to be essentials of Punjabi character, vibrated throughout the Heer Ranjha story.

It is quite evident now that notwithstanding the profound influence exercised by the bulk of Sanskrit literature, the fact remains that Persian romance has a greater thematic impact than the Sanskrit on regional literature, while in case of poetic exuberance, Sanskrit impact is more prominent. But when we come to regional literatures like Bengali or Punjabi, the question which immediately confronts us is — how are we to account for these similarities between the two? Should they be treated as conforming to tradition or are polygenetic in nature? It is probable that both of them derived inspiration from a common literary source — in some cases Sanskrit but mostly Persian and embellished them by local colour. Influenced, though they might have been by the prevailing conventions, they developed their individual characteristics which provide them with separate identity. From the methodological point of view, it may be concluded that in absence of recorded evidences and facts establishing a direct

contact between the two literatures i.e. Bengali and Punjabi, which were separated by a vast stretch of distance, it is difficult for a comparatist to apply French method where tangible direct contacts between two literatures are essential for comparison. On the other hand, influence aesthetics applied to such areas is deemed valid by the American school; that is — where affinities can be marked inspite of no definite contacts as such. These similarities prevailing in Bengali and Punjabi stories can very well be explained as polygenetic in nature, which according to K.K. Ruthven “results in the creation of identical things by different people at different times”.<sup>5</sup> It may be mentioned here that this is the basic premise behind the study of analogies. If we take into consideration the five purposes of analogy study, proposed by Michael Moriarty<sup>6</sup> (1) “The establishment of literary norms which theoretically apply to all literatures through comparison drawn between different cultural traditions; (2) the discovery of historical facts shared by works of literature which were created within the same cultural tradition; (3) a technique to help foster critical and aesthetic appreciation of literature; (4) the use of analogy as a tool in discovery of methods for studying literature by going outside literature to other disciplines; and (5) the study of literature in comparison with the other arts.” We will see that since in this particular case, we are virtually left with no other alternative, but to approach with tools of aesthetic and literary analogy, we would allude to the first purpose, propounded by Moriarty — that analogy study here is adopted to establish these stories as Romances identifying certain norms, common to both, from two different cultures. With a background, developed by Sanskrit and Perso-Arabic traditions, the corpus of medieval romances like those of Mahua or Heer-Ranjha blossomed with superb beauty of their own and bearing striking similarities, polygenetic though these might be. To evaluate their literary phenomena and make use of their potentials in the understanding of our cultural roots, analogy study appears to be the best plausible solution.

## NOTES

1. Persian scholar Hekmat has listed not less than forty Persian and thirteen Turkish versions of this story.

2. In the English version edited by Dr. R. Gelpke, Qays and Laila were described as fellow students, belonging to two different local tribes.

3. According to the compiler of the Maimansimha-gitika Dinesh Chandra Sen opined that these Bengali ballads were free from Sanskritic impact. On the other hand, he felt that Urdu elements adopted in the Bengali ballad poems had undergone an essential change.

4. It may be mentioned here that in the English version *Laila-Majnun* edited by Dr. R. Gelpke, Naofel is not portrayed as a villain, rather a well-wisher of Majnun. In this version Laila is married to Iban Salam, who was a sympathetic and good soul.

5. K. K. Ruthven "Literary Influences", *Critical Assumptions* (Cambridge, 1984), cited in: Swapan Majumdar in his essay "Influence Aesthetics in a colonial context", *Comparative Literature : Indian Dimensions* (Calcutta, Papyrus, 1987), p. 93.

6. Unpublished dissertation on "The Uses of Analogy : an essay in the methodology of Comparative Literature", p. 103, quoted in : Ulrich Weisstein, *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (Bert 1981), p. 132. Cited in: Swapan Majumdar in his essay "Influence Aesthetics in a Colonial Context", op. cit.